

The Snow Melts, and Until it Falls Again

Prologue

Two Years Prior

Touma Kazusa hated the sky.

In spring, she had skipped out on the opening ceremony for the affiliated high school of Houjou University, and sprawled out on her back along a riverbed nearby. The perfectly clear blue sky above her was in great contrast to the dusky clouds in her heart, and she didn't like that at all.

A few days before that, Kazusa's mother had announced that she was leaving the country.

Touma Youko, world-class profligate pianist and Kazusa's only blood relative, had rattled off a list of blatantly selfish reasons to her daughter before jetting off to Paris to shift her base of operations to Europe.

Throughout Kazusa's childhood, Youko had never shown up to any events outside of competitions. She never made dinner. She was out of the house constantly, and although she claimed it was for concert tours, Kazusa knew that that was only true about half the time—the other half involved her going on honeymoon with whatever man she was currently involved with.

Even so, Kazusa had never felt dissatisfied with her debauched mother before.

For about half the year, Youko stayed in the same house as she did, ate at the same table, and gave her praise in the event of a successful competition. She truly believed from the bottom of her heart that she was needed by her mother—that she was loved.

Nevertheless...

"There's no point in bringing you with me as you are now."

The moment she heard these merciless words out of her own mother's mouth, the little girl who still bore the name of Touma Kazusa felt that the former Touma Kazusa had vanished.

The world didn't need this new Touma Kazusa.

This wasn't a fact, but simply a change in the way Kazusa herself felt. For a girl in the middle of adolescence, any statement to the contrary would only serve to fuel her anger.

Ever since then, the way people spoke to her, looked at her, felt about her... No, not just people—not even just living things—but everything; every color, sound, smell, flavor, tactile sensation seemed to hide another, secret meaning behind its surface, and she began to feel that they were all spiting her, mocking her, monitoring her, and yet disregarding her.

And so, Kazusa decided to hate everything around her... which, at present, was the sky filling her field of vision.

It was easier than hating her mother.

Touma Kazusa hated her teacher.

The day after the entrance ceremony, Kazusa arrived at school to find the music program instructor waiting for her, who gave the new students a servile smile, and then guided her to the third floor of the other building after school.

In the middle of the classroom beneath the plate reading "Music Room 2," a brand new grand piano sat enshrined. Its engraving, "Donated by Touma Youko," shone in gold, bright enough to make Kazusa wince.

While Kazusa stood there sighing, her teacher spoke of the high expectations Houjou High School—and especially the music program—had for her in particular, even though she was just a first-year student. She promised that they would give Kazusa full priority regarding her musical activities, publicly declaring to give her special treatment over the other students.

Kazusa decided to take her up on that offer immediately.

"Then get out. I'm going to practice now."

Had the teacher gotten mad and warned her about her rudeness, Kazusa might have realized how ridiculously stubborn she was being. Perhaps she would have shown honest remorse like she used to, and her relationship with her teacher would have taken a turn for the better.

However, the female teacher with black-rimmed glasses only widened her eyes at Kazusa for a moment, and with a servile smile, she accepted the impudence of the student who was ten years younger than her and said, "Alright, come to the faculty room once you're done so I can lock the door after you."

And so, Kazusa decided to hate the woman who was to be her teacher, the school administration that forced her to take such an "adult attitude," and all of the other teachers, even though they had nothing to do with it.

It was too bothersome to make all these little distinctions between enemies and allies.

Touma Kazusa hated her classmates.

A short period after the entrance ceremony, once classes had begun in earnest, a male student began talking to her in the middle of practice as though they were friends.

This classmate, who introduced himself as Matsukawa Takanori, spoke proudly of the relationship they shared as frequent competitors for overall competition victories, and spoke even more proudly of how only the two of them had been selected to participate in the national competition taking place next month. Kazusa had no memory of the former and no interest in the latter, so she began to treat him with utter indifference.

In the face of this unforeseen response from his "only worthy rival," Matsukawa forced himself to interpret her actions as "just playing hard to please," and started to cling to her even more desperately.

He simply could not think of a single reason for Kazusa to hate him, after all.

He believed that people of high class should stick together, and there was no doubt in his mind that they were the only available partners for each other who could help each other grow not only as pianists, but as people too.

Eventually, a certain incident put an end to his one-sided attention.

It happened one evening at school, when the two of them were alone together in the classroom...

None but the two of them knew the details of what had occurred, but the end result had Matsukawa writhing in pain with his hands on his groin while Kazusa was kicking around desks and chairs, as if trying to do away with the disgusting sensation lingering in her foot.

It was Kazusa's habit as a pianist not to use her fists, but there was no particular reason behind her aiming for his groin.

Regardless, this event was "generously" swept under the rug by the school as a minor incident, and the two of them got away without any disciplinary action taken against them.

Despite that... or perhaps because of that, an irreparable friction appeared between Kazusa and her classmates less than a month after her meeting them.

And so, Kazusa decided to hate everyone in the classroom equally.

She didn't want to direct special hatred toward Matsukawa, as that would only inflate his excessive self-importance. The deciding factor was that no one would talk to her anymore anyway.

And thus the month passed, and it was time for the spring national competition.

A first-year student taking first place barely two months after enrolling was doubtlessly the greatest achievement of the school. The principal, board chairman, and vice principal all came to praise the single girl who had pulled it off.

Her teacher displayed her usual servile smile as she followed her superiors in their praise.

The upperclassmen who had lasted into the final round of the same competition applauded mechanically, their eyes cast down.

And among her fellow first-years... not a single one had come to this national competition to support her. That was the degree to which Kazusa had antagonized and separated herself from the surrounding world after a mere two months. But Kazusa showed no concern for those disagreeable responses.

She accepted her certificate with a blank expression, then wordlessly cut off the people praising her and left the venue, leaving behind both the certificate and the trophy.

The feeling that filled her at that moment wasn't happiness, a sense of accomplishment or anger. It wasn't even a feeling of emptiness. It was apathy. Or so it seemed.

Kazusa couldn't properly remember what had happened after she opened the front door to her house that night.

Not the small parcel on her doorstep, not the dog plushie inside it that was clearly unfit for someone her age, not the card attached that read, "Happy birthday" signed by her mother, not the fact that today—marked by the day of her competition victory—was a week after her birthday, and not the fact that the plushie in front of her had oddly cute eyes.

She couldn't remember that she had begun screaming at some point, that she had thrown her mother's belated present at the wall, that she had picked it up again and torn at it with her nails, that her vision had begun to blur, that she had become unable to control the ugly feelings within her and had blurted them out, that she had made herself believe that she had nothing left, nothing, truly nothing...

Kazusa's victory was a big enough deal to warrant mention in the regional section of the newspaper the next day, with a photograph included. Of course, the name "Touma Youko" showed up five times in the article, including in the headline, but Kazusa wasn't going to find that article, or even look for it.

Touma Kazusa came to hate the piano. For her, at the time, that meant the same thing as hating the whole world.

Chapter 1

Spring

"Touma."

"....."

She'd been dreaming.

The worst kind of nightmare—memories she never wanted to think of again, rushing one after another through her brain like a revolving lantern.

"Touma... hey... I'm sorry, but could you wake up for a second?"

"...Mh?"

But waking had never been a pleasant thing for her, and Kazusa's heart was frayed enough that she felt furious even at the one she should have been thanking for calling out to her and waking her up from that nightmare.

...Granted, for the past several years, she had never been capable of anything as admirable as facing another with good will.

"...!"

"...?"

She lifted her face to find a uniformed male student, looking sharply at her with wide eyes.

...At least, his expression was stiff enough for her to be able to interpret it that way.

"....."

The fact that her present world was two years after that dream, the fact that she was currently in a third-year regular course classroom, the fact that it was sixth period... no, based on the noise around her, the school day had probably ended already. All of these facts streamed into her head, bringing her back to reality.

"...Mh."

However, as the aforementioned male student was simply standing there, frozen, Kazusa took advantage of the moment and laid her head back down on the desk...

"Ahh!? Sorry, sorry! You are Touma Kazusa, right?"

"...Mh."

...Only to be roused again immediately after, souring her mood even further.

Her physical state aside, the dream had left her in a rotten place mentally, and with this flimsy wake-up call on top of it, she finally turned to face the student, making no effort whatsoever to hide her temper.

"You haven't been attending school since the opening ceremony, right? Are you feeling okay?"

"...Eh?"

Her first impression of him... Really, there wasn't much of an impression to get.

Unremarkable height, unremarkable build, unremarkable hairstyle, unremarkable looks.

"Here, textbooks for all your classes. Student ID. Various application forms—They are sorted based on how near the deadline is."

The single thing that distinguished him was that, unlike every other male student, the top button of his shirt was done.

"Class hasn't progressed much during the time you've been away, but there's quite a lot of forms to be filled out and..."

"....."

His initial glare vanished, and she could tell that he was showing this calm, friendly, concerned attitude in an effort to make her drop her guard.

But he didn't stop looking straight into her eyes. Kazusa had barely ever made eye-contact with others, so the uncomfortable feeling was unshakable.

"Also, here... I grabbed a copy of the student discount application for you. You're in Iwazu-chou, so you commute here by train, right?"

"....."

Never breaking eye contact, he piled book after book and bundles of paper on her desk.

"Now, make absolutely sure you don't forget this one. The parent gathering flyer. It starts next week, so give it to your guardian sometime today."

"Guardian..."

"I would have preferred to deliver it straight to your house, but I got busy with some other stuff... Sorry about that."

The way he unwittingly struck a sore spot got on her nerves.

He probably thought himself gentle and kind with his pushiness, but Kazusa had had enough of that. And those on-the-spot apologies, which served only to further that pushiness, ticked her off even more.

In other words, she didn't like a single thing about the boy in front of her.

"Do you have any questions so far? I'll answer anything I can."

In response to this boy, who said one thing after another to further her irritation, Kazusa only shook her head in silence.

In her early days here, she had snapped at everything she didn't like; now, with all that she had learned in the past two years, it was too much of a bother.

"I see, that's good. Now then..."

"Phew."

"...Now I will explain how to fill out these forms. First, we have the jersey order form."

"....."

And yet this shameless boy took Kazusa's generous compromise all too literally, as though she had said, "No problem, go ahead."

"...What's the matter?"

"...ing"

"Hm?"

"You're annoying."

He was really annoying.

She had finally managed to stop flinging her negative emotions on others. Even if her reason was something basic and uninspiring, like, arguing is too much of a bother, the fact was that, as a result, she had managed to avoid discord with those around her.

"I get that a lot, but this is important. If you find me annoying, you'll find that memorizing all this is the fastest way to get rid of me."

"....."

And yet, and yet... Who did this tactless, high-handed and insolent guy think he was?

"Ah... Right. This is our first meeting. I'm Kitahara Haruki. I'm the class representative for Class E during the first term."

"No one asked for your name."

"You've had that look on your face that reads "Who the hell are you?" for a while now."

"...!"

She didn't even know his name... No, he had just told her, but she had no intention of remembering it...

"...Are you still feeling under the weather after all? Do you want to go to the infirmary? I'll go with you."

"...Don't touch me."

"Hm? No, I haven't actually touched you yet."

"....."

Was this insignificant roadside pebble trying to make itself an obstacle in her life? Even though it's not large, sharp, or even on the road itself?

Kazusa could feel the anger well up in her for the first time in a long time...

"...Alright, we can do the rest later. Ah, in that case, could you take this home with you after school..."

"Don't touch me!"

Before she knew it, she had exceeded her limit.

"...Phew."

Around the time that the warm spring sun had begun to set, steadily bringing in a chill that served as a reminder that winter had just ended, Kazusa exited the school gates alone.

Her expression retained the heat of her earlier anger, and her tightly drawn mouth and narrowed eyes, coupled with the bridge of her nose, produced a sense of sharp, unapproachable beauty.

Of course, the people who passed by her, giving her a wide berth, had no way of knowing that what had given rise to this frightening beauty was something so ridiculously childish.

"His damn fault."

When Kazusa had stormed out of the classroom, almost slamming against the door, everyone—including him—only stared at her in silence over her sudden violent outburst.

It was a scene that had played out often enough in the music program classroom that she had been in until last year, but it wasn't something Kazusa had meant to happen this year.

At this rate, she didn't know anymore why she had transferred into the regular program. Kazusa had wanted to start anew in a new class where she knew no one and no one knew her, to live a monotonous school life and if possible, even graduate. But her first day in the regular program went just as poorly as usual. And also just as usual, Kazusa fell into despair.

In the end, nothing had changed.

In the closed-off world of Houjou High School, there was not a single person who would understand her, acknowledge her, and leave her alone like she wanted.

...When putting it that way, it's obvious to anyone that the friction between her and her surroundings was something she had brought on herself, but since Kazusa didn't count herself as "anyone," she kept repeating the same mistake as if it were a yearly tradition.

It had already been two years since she looked up at the sky on the day of the entrance ceremony...

Touma Kazusa still hated the sky.

She always hated this spring sky, decorated with thin clouds.

She hated the teachers, the students, everyone and everything around her. She had reason enough to hate every single thing that might enter her field of vision. And that's why Touma Kazusa... hated that overfamiliar male student more than anything.

There were three music rooms in Houjou High School.

Music Room 1, in the main school building, was used for the regular program's music classes during the day, and for the music club after school.

Music Room 3, in the new building, was occupied exclusively by the music program throughout the day, and with its location so far removed from the regular program, regular students never went near it.

And then there was Music Room 2...

This place, next to Music Room 1, was used by the music program class when they were still based in the main building. Presently it was not used for any classes or club activities, so it was locked all day round.

It would have been perfectly reasonable to allow some of the various musical clubs to use it after school, but there was a reason neither the students nor the teachers raised a fuss about it. It had nothing to do with some urban legend or ghost story, but rather a result of various misunderstandings and opinions about the room.

The regular program students assumed that the room was still reserved for the music program, as it had once been. The music program students no longer saw any value in the existence of the room.

And the teachers... avoided the subject of the room's current user.

Today, yet again, the tones of the piano rang out from the closed Music Room 2.

The opening ceremony was in a week's time. Even now, in her third year, having transferred into the regular program, Kazusa inhabited this classroom, whether during or after school... the "Master of Music Room 2."

The guitar solo from *Forbidden Games* floated in the wind, weaving its way through the gaps between the piano's notes.

In spring, two years ago, when Kazusa was first brought here... It was truly a day to be commemorated. She had chased out her teacher and taken exclusive ownership of the room, making definite her own assessment of herself as "the audacious problem child who uses her parent's fame and donations as a shield to hide behind."

Since then, that classroom became a taboo subject even to those involved, and the grand piano worth no less than 3 million yen that Kazusa's mother donated became her own personal plaything.

Kazusa never returned the key to the classroom, choosing to come and go at her own leisure, spending countless hours playing the piano and countless other instruments scattered around the classroom.

The guitar moved on to Yesterday.

Since the competition two years ago, Kazusa had never stood on stage as a pianist. In fact, after that day, Kazusa stopped enjoying playing the piano. And so, this was neither practice nor recreation.

It was simply a force of habit.

She didn't aim to improve her technique, worry about any mistakes, or lament the rustyness of her skill. She merely played without thinking, or perhaps she played to avoid thinking.

She played with her whole heart and soul to erase every distasteful, painful, and sorrowful memory from her mind.

That also meant that all the fun and happy memories were erased all the same, but that was not worth worrying about. Nothing fun or happy had happened to her recently anyway...

The guitar moved on to White Album...

"Oh, for god's sake!"

However, that day Kazusa slammed at the piano keys in frustration, as if she had forgotten to not think about anything.

Of course, her frustration did not stem from her own skill...

"You're so crappy!"

She simply couldn't stand how unskilled the guitar sounds flowing through the window were.

She had been hearing that sound every evening the past few days.

Once the wind ensemble and choir had finished their practice, there was a single person who stayed behind in Music Room 1, his fumbling guitar solo overlapping with Kazusa's smooth piano.

Honestly, it was beyond annoying. It was probably some first-year student who decided to pick up the guitar to form a band, but the lack of technique and talent was unbearable for Kazusa, who had been blessed with both since birth.

It had started to take a toll on her own performance, and the sense that the sounds were fleeing from her fingertips was sapping Kazusa's will to keep performing.

"I'm going home..."

The guitar continued stumbling through White Album.

Kazusa put her hands over her ears, absolutely determined not to hear any more of that racket, and hurriedly left the building.

Along the way home, she made up her mind to soothe her exhausted brain by giving it a massive amount of sugar...

Touma Kazusa loved pudding.

Actually, she loved everything sweet, not just pudding.

She didn't know whether it was because she had inherited her own mother's enormous sweet tooth, or whether it was a result of her mother being the one who fed her, but this childish palate had never changed, forcing a fearsome battle with her dental health to unfold.

Well, no, there had been one little change.

...An astonishing change: she had become even more devoted to sweet things than she had been before.

Understandably, she avoided spicy things, which she had never liked in the first place—but recently, her tastes had come to repel bitter and sour things as well, and hot things, and cold things, for that matter, had largely been removed, further narrowing her food options from a list that was already lacking in variety.

Ice cream gave way to cake and pudding, lemon tea to milk tea, and she stopped drinking carbonated drinks and fruit juice...

Her one special exception was coffee, but even that was most likely a front put on for her surroundings; if she didn't disguise it with heaps of sugar and creamer, her throat couldn't handle the bitterness and heat.

At present, Kazusa herself paid no mind to what was apparently a simple change in preferences.

But if a counselor or psychiatrist were to examine her, they might have realized that the darkness in her heart was having a serious impact on her palate.

Without her realizing it, Kazusa's brain had been screaming for a long, long time.

Screaming out that at least her palate should go on without any stimulation. Screaming out that at least her tongue can avoid pain.

"Another one of those."

"...C-Coming right up."

Now, indifferent to these signs, Kazusa downed her second pudding and calmly ordered a third.

Pudding was her favorite food, regardless of type, ingredients, or price... but the pudding listed on the recommendations menu at this restaurant, "Goodies" in Minami-Suetsugu, was her number one.

Because, compared to anywhere else, the pudding here was so sweet and flavorful, that any first-time customer would ask themselves why such a thing would even be on the recommended menu.

Then, right as Kazusa was bringing the final bite to her mouth, with a faintly blissful expression that no one would ever see from her at school...

"I'm telling you, you don't have to think that hard about it. We're all just going to hang out."

From right behind her, voices reached her—voices she had heard just recently, somewhere...

"What's this about? You never even said a word to me until second year, Iizuka-kun."

"Well... You know, Yui-chan. You were dating Takada, weren't you?"

"...You seem to know a lot."

"Because I had my eye on you. It came as a pretty big shock when I found out you had a boyfriend..."

Rattling off the same shallow lines she had heard somewhere before, that set her teeth on edge.

"I see, and now you've got your hands on the latest scoop... that we broke up."

"You're sharp."

Kazusa turned her head—carefully, so that the speakers wouldn't notice—and found a couple, dressed in Houjou High School uniforms, chatting lightheartedly.

Kazusa's guess was half-right: she recognized the boy.

"What, so you thought this was your chance? You thought I would just leap into someone else's arms?"

"If you want to leap into my arms, by all means, feel free."

"What if I told you I'm not that easy?"

"An opportunity to test my powers of persuasion? More than welcome."

"You're good at this, Izuka-kun. I've heard all sorts of stuff from Sawa-chan."

"Well, why don't we see whether any of it is true?"

That slender build, unruly light-brown hair, and wheedling voice and tone brought back yesterday's memory vividly.

It was the boy who had persistently stuck around her on her way home yesterday.

"Touma-san, from Class E, right?"

"I'm Izuka Takeya from Class G. Maybe you've heard of me?"

"Oh, perhaps you know Haruki then? Kitahara Haruki, the guy who sits next to you."

"I'm a friend of his. He told me about you."

"Sooo, I decided to talk to you, because I'm interested in getting to know you!"

"I have to admit, I'm surprised. I didn't know we had any girls of your level in our year... Man, I should have my card revoked for not noticing you."

"Where are you headed? Why don't we go grab some tea, if you've got a minute?"

"Oh, I don't really mean anything deep by that. I just wanna chat a little."

"...You're the shy type, I see."

"You were in the music program until last year, right? We don't get a lot of people transferring into the regular program."

"By the way, are you related to Touma Youko at all?"

It sounded like the guy was ready to keep on yammering at her like that forever, but Kazusa had to stop him there.

...With a sharp roundhouse kick.

"Hmm, well... If you promise it won't just be the two of us, I'll think about it."

"Oh, that's fine by me. I love a big fun group."

"How about it, then? Sometime during Golden Week?"

But today, he seemed to be getting a response with far more potential than yesterday's catch.

And the girl sitting across from him—the wrong half of Kazusa's guess, someone she assumed she didn't know but in fact sat two seats ahead of her—had a lively bounce in her voice, showing that she was enjoying clashing verbal swords with him.

In other words, there was clearly a spark.

"So, on the 3rd... How about ten o'clock that morning, in front of the Minami-Suetsugu ticket gate?"

"I'll find someone to invite along, and I'll call you when I've decided."

"Great, let's swap numbers."

Now both uncomfortable and in a bad mood after being forced to hear a shallow boy-girl conversation like this, Kazusa resigned herself to moving somewhere else and stood up slowly, so the two of them wouldn't spot her...

"Really? Kitahara-kun? I'm not so sure about him..."

And that name, with which she had become so familiar lately, froze her there.

"Eh? Why?"

"Kitahara-kun... He's the class rep, right?"

She was forced to hear that name for the second day in a row.

The first boy who had spoken to her in class.

The tactless, pushy class rep.

The only classmate who still insisted on talking to her, even though she had decided to isolate herself.

The friend of the shallow guy she was seeing here.

The snitch who sold her out to him.

The embodiment of nosiness, who dug up the fact that she was originally in the music program, and Touma Youko's daughter to boot.

The nasty, calculating scumbag who approached her precisely because he knew.

All of Kazusa's anger collected around that perfectly remembered name, "Kitahara Haruki," even more than it did around the guy in front of her.

Her very first impression of him remained—"This is all his damn fault..."

"Yeah, I can't think of any girl who'd want to invite him."

"Why? Something wrong with him?"

"...I mean, you get my meaning, don't you?"

Yes, I know very well.

"He's not bad looking, though, right? Don't worry, I'll do something about the clothes."

"No, he looks fine, but isn't he annoying?"

Yes. Blatantly annoying.

"Like, he just randomly showed up at my house the other day. He said he looked me up in the address book."

That sounds just like him.

"Were you absent from school that day? Or did you forget something?"

"Well, yeah, okay, I was absent. I was at a big concert the night before."

"He was probably coming to check up on you, then."

"Yeah, but what about showing consideration?"

Yep. That guy's fatally lacking when it comes to showing restraint around others.

"Did he come in? Did he force you to make tea for him?"

"No, he went right home... But, like..."

Yes, but...

His extreme interference in other people's lives produces nothing but loathing...

"...Sorry, something's come up. I'm gonna go."

"Eh?"

"...Eh?"

At that moment, the word she had been muttering to herself unconsciously fell out of her mouth.

Because the smooth feather-lightness of his speech had suddenly taken on an unpleasant weight.

"Here's my part of the bill. I had fun today. I'll be going now."

"W-Wait, Iizuka-kun!"

The girl made a slightly flustered attempt to stop him, perhaps having picked up on the same weight that Kazusa had noticed.

"We haven't settled on everything for the hangout yet! Who's gonna be there?"

"Oh, right, that..."

"What do you mean, 'Oh, right, that'!?"

"Sorry, I have a lot on my plate that day. See you next time."

But he clearly had no interest in listening to what she had to say any more.

"...What are you so mad about?"

"Listen..."

"Eh...?"

"You've only been in the same class for a couple weeks. Don't talk about Haruki like you know him."

"W-What are you talking about?"

Seriously, what was he talking about?

Wasn't Haruki the weird one for going to visit someone he'd only been classmates with for a couple weeks just because she missed a day?

"At least wait until you've known him for half a year before you judge him. Bye."

"Wait, hang on! Iizuka-kun, you're acting completely different from how you just were! Hey, wait, I said!"

"....."

"Iizuka-kun" quickly walked right past Kazusa.

But, even though Kazusa was sitting right there, he didn't notice her. He just left the restaurant with a dry look on his face, as if he had completely lost interest in the other girl.

For that very reason, Kazusa couldn't take her eyes off of him.

Because some part of her felt, irrationally, as if that condescending look was directed at her.

"...What the hell was that? Is he dumb or something!?"

The frustrated yell let loose by the deserted girl could have come from Kazusa, one day before.

Because she was doing nothing more than representing Kazusa's own impression. The words that came out of her mouth were Kazusa's words.

Therefore, Kazusa understood—no, she experienced the same feeling.

A blaze of humiliation, and an overwhelming desire to run away, as if she had been doused with cold water. Those were, again, the emotions brought about in her by that "Kitahara Haruki," the class representative.

"Touma."

"....."

She was dreaming. A strange dream that could be seen as either wonderful or terrible—she was an ant, drowning in sweet honey.

"Touma... Hey... Wake up!"

"...Hnnh?"

Released from her ultimate choice—life or sugar—Kazusa wiped off the tears and saliva that had dribbled out and turned to face the one who had brought her back to reality.

"Good morning. It's rare to see you here before class starts."

"...Ha..."

"You don't have to sigh that loudly."

It wasn't a sigh—she was about to say, "Kitahara Haruki," and hurriedly cut herself off. How many years had it been since she last memorized someone's full name?

"...Hmm..."

"Good morning! Good morning, Touma! The bell's about to ring! Sit up!"

"Mm... mmph..."

Her attempting to continue sleeping even though she was being addressed, the way she begrudgingly stretched, her attitude of zero interest, it was all a half-bluff.

She certainly didn't want to be interfered with or pried into any further.

...But, even more than that, she didn't want anyone to figure out that she had taken a tiny bit of interest in this boy.

"Look, I'm sorry for waking you up, but the career interest survey is due at lunch today."

"...Eh..."

"I'll be collecting them for the teacher. I figured you probably threw out the form, so here's a new one. I already filled in what I know, like your name."

Blatant meddling. Cloying friendliness. Transparent nosiness.

Compared to Kazusa's previous experiences, this was the most similar to the ulterior motives of the adults who swarmed around her—no, around the Touma family's status, fame, and fortune.

"I won't look at what you write. It'll go straight in the envelope, and I won't take a peek whatsoever. So, well, um, please fill it out before lunch."

And yet, Kazusa couldn't spot any sign of self-interest in his words or actions, which made her feel indescribably ill at ease.

"No, don't just roll it up. Fill it in properly."

"I'm not interested in this."

As a result, she took an unintentionally defiant attitude. Defiant in a way that was different from a month ago—lighter, not wholly rejecting his interference.

"If you want, you can just write 'university,' 'find employment,' or just 'I haven't decided yet. The teacher said that you should at least write your current thoughts, or lack thereof."

"Besides, if you're so interested in bothering me, why don't you go collect everyone else's forms...?"

"I picked everyone else's forms up yesterday. Yours is the last one."

"...There were about three people absent yesterday, weren't there?"

"I gave them a phone call and picked the forms up at their houses. They filled them out, even though they were sick."

"...Stupid?"

As always, she was dizzyingly irritated by what he was doing. But strangely, the school's number one stickler for the rules held the admiration of the most frivolous guy at school.

Kazusa still couldn't comprehend this contradiction—this close friendship between two people of such polar opposite personalities, with no apparent common ground.

"That's a cruel thing to say. Our classmates are all serious, you know."

"Who do you think I'm talking about...?"

And because she couldn't comprehend it, she hesitated to hate him more than she did.

She couldn't shake the worry that she was operating under some enormous misunderstanding.

"Besides, the school is affiliated with a university, so you can write down, 'Enrolling in Houjou University.' They couldn't care less if you just wrote that down."

"There's just no way I'm going there."

She muttered to herself, pretending to talk back, while looking into his face—casually, but deliberately—with upturned eyes.

"So you don't want to lie...? You're more sincere than I thought. I'm impressed."

"...Don't jump to your own conclusions and see me in a *better light*. It's annoying."

No matter how hard I look at him, he's just average. Completely ordinary.

He's not ugly enough to make me want to look away, nor is he handsome enough to make me stare at him.

...Granted, guys in either of those extremes probably make up less than 1% of all men.

"If you don't want people to reevaluate their opinion of you, just going along with the flow would work out better, you know."

"What are you saying?"

*But, maybe he's just a **tiny** bit above average.*

Maybe he's like a 5.5, or a 6, instead of just a 5.

"Look, that way people wouldn't be so impressed when you give a rare display of good conduct and evaluate you more normally, right?"

"I have no intention of letting anyone evaluate me."

As proof, I might not be captivated by him, but looking at him up this close isn't terrible, either.

Actually, I could probably keep on looking at him like this...

"I don't recommend filling out the form during class. If you can, try to get it done before the first bell..."

"You really are..."

No, maybe it's a mistake for me to try to make that judgement in the first place.

I've never concerned myself with guys my age... or of any age, for that matter.

Not even those who might be my father.

I don't have any interest in myself, let alone other people. Why would I try to evaluate someone else...?

But, in that case, where should I look instead?

What should I use to decide what's good or bad about him? And what kind of effect

will the outcome of that decision have on me...?

"Well, this decision could have an effect on the rest of your life, so you can think about it for a little longer. I'll leave it up to you, then."

"...!"

Suddenly returning to herself, Kazusa hurriedly dropped her eyes to the paper in front of her and started writing intently.

"Ah... Good, good!"

Her own revulsion at how she was acting and thinking had sent a chill down her spine.

She was acting like some little girl, staring at the young man who was right in front of her and letting thoughts of him run through her mind.

"...Kitahara..."

"Is there something you're not sure how to fill out?"

"I'll do as you ask, so you can at least listen to one of my requests."

"Ahh, of course! If there's anything bothering you, I'm sure I can help..."

"If I ignore you from now on, don't worry about it. I'm just extremely annoyed and disgusted."

"I... I see."

Ridiculous. I can't be interested in someone. That's completely ridiculous.

"Here, I'm done. Take it."

"Whoa, don't throw it at me. You should turn it over first..."

I don't care who idolizes this guy.

It doesn't matter how much appeal he has as a person.

This is a problem that exerts absolutely no influence on the world I live in.

"I don't really care if you look at it. I just wrote, 'Enrolling in Houjou University,' like you said."

"...Are you going to?"

"Who knows?"

"...I see."

If I don't keep that distinction, it'll only get me in trouble.

The over-familiar way he's acting is abnormal in the first place.

If I go easy on him, there's no knowing how he might take advantage of me.

"Are we done here? I'm going back to sleep, then."

"Ah, sorry. One last thing."

"...What?"

"I get it... From now on, I won't mind if you ignore me or anything."

"Ah... Okay."

She had meant to draw the line.

And yet, the moment she heard his words of resignation, an odd flicker of displeasure appeared on Kazusa's face...

"So please don't hold it against me if I keep on rambling anyway, Touma."

"...Eh?"

She had meant to draw the line.

And yet, the moment she heard his words, entirely lacking in resignation, blatant displeasure splashed itself all over Kazusa's face.

"Good morning, Touma. Great weather we're having today, huh?"

"Just wait a second, Kitahara. That's not how the promise..."

"I'll do as you ask, so isn't it only fair that you listen to one of my requests?"

"This isn't 'just one thing'! How shameless can you be!?"

"Touma... don't tell me you've just noticed that *now*."

Kazusa cursed. She cursed her own foolishness for being lenient with someone this irritating and over-friendly.

Over the course of the next month, Kazusa gradually came to understand...

That those who depended on Kitahara Haruki, and those who avoided him, were divided into two clear groups, with clear trends.

As Kazusa was a newcomer to the regular program this year, she struggled at first to get a clue, but once she realized it, it was a conclusion easily reached just by looking over the student roster handed out each year.

It wasn't a matter of gender, grades, or personality, but rather of the make-up of last year's classes, and the year before last year's.

That is to say, a difference between those who had experienced being in class with him before, as first- or second-year students, and those who hadn't.

The latter tried to distance themselves from Kitahara Haruki, hated the way he meddled, reacted negatively to his lectures, and were utterly exasperated with the way he continued to involve himself with them regardless.

And the former had given up on trying to fight Kitahara Haruki from the get-go and trusted him fully.

What demonstrated this clearly to her was some trouble that got stirred up with the boy who sat in front of her, whom Kitahara called Hayasaka.

Hayasaka, who had been appointed to the Sports Day Committee at the class's endorsement against his will, had been skipping required meetings, neglecting to make preparations, and even with the event a mere week away, the players participating in each match had yet to be decided on. In other words, he had created an absolutely wretched situation.

In this moment of crisis for the class, Kitahara swooped in and backed him up completely without any fussing or panicking.

Well, maybe the ratio of the arrangements he made was a little too high to call it "backing up"...

Kitahara attended all the necessary meetings in Hayasaka's place, finished getting the program in order, got the private consent of all the main members to select the athletes, and on his own brought things to a point at which all that remained was a class-wide vote.

And, after carrying all of this out silently, he at last broke his silence, and began lecturing Hayasaka at length after homeroom.

Hayasaka, who had completely humiliated himself, refused to back down even though he was plainly entirely in the wrong; and rather than just ignore Kitahara's lecture, he lashed back outright, bringing the atmosphere to an explosive state.

Kitahara didn't fight back, however, nor did he even act shocked—he just earnestly pointed out all of his problems, and suggested that they work on Sports Day together.

But, unable to back down once he had gone on the offensive, Hayasaka got even more heated...

And those who remained optimistic in this critical situation were the former of the two groups mentioned above... Kitahara's "previous victims," who had been in class with him before.

They had known from the start how to get along with Kitahara.

And they understood him extraordinarily well; that's why they didn't freak out over the incident and accommodated Hayasaka... at least, they treated him as best as they could, with the circumstances remaining up in the air.

All they could offer was support that wasn't really support—"Getting angry is pointless," "If you take everything he says seriously you'll end up pulling all your hair out," "He wants the short end of the stick, so please just settle this now."

One week later, saddled with these problems, Sports Day took place...

That day, Kazusa came to understand yet another thing. After skipping all of the events and killing time in Music Room 2, she looked out the window at the evening schoolyard, and saw...

A group of noisy third-year students, entering the post-Sports Day grounds with drinks.

The most boisterous among them were from their own class, Class E.

And the most roused up of all of them, Hayasaka, had a drink in one hand (probably tea) and his other arm was slung around Kitahara, who was drinking something quietly (probably tea).

It looked from here like Kitahara was still lecturing him about something, the same as ever, but now, Hayasaka—as if, in a scant few days, he had come to understand—simply, let it pass smoothly, roaring with laughter.

"At least wait until you've known him for half a year before you judge him."

Kazusa didn't want to remember what the shallow guy had said, but it came back to her anyway.

Starting the next week, the vibe in the classroom was markedly different.

The stiffness in the air between Haruki and a certain group of students vanished, and they all began turning to him readily, pushing the most trivial things on him, and letting the forthcoming lectures from him go in one ear and out the other, laughing every time.

Were that all, there might have been the negative possibility of his falling to the status of class handyman. However, the attitude and mood of those all around was thoroughly bright, with no sarcasm or spite any more, and any inclination to ridicule or reject his sincerity had been purged.

And, most notably, Hayasaka, one of the primary parties concerned, had begun to address Kitahara as Haruki—and, in response, Kitahara had begun to call him Chikashi, as well.

Everyone acknowledged Kitahara Haruki as an indispensable member of the class.

Actually, probably none of them were aware of that constructive shift in sentiment—they all assumed that they were handling their nagging class rep the same as they always had.

Kazusa was the only one who recognized the change in atmosphere as a change. Because she was the least necessary person in the class. The only outsider, watching the Sports Day event from high up.

And... the girl who spent the most time looking at Kitahara Haruki.

For the past while, Kazusa had never taken her eyes off of him.

Making use of the fact that she was ignored by the rest of the class, she made a big show of pretending to nap during class and during breaks, face-down on the desk, while, through the gaps between her arms, she watched the side of his face, and picked up all the voices whispering around him.

...Had her mother, who had poured so much money into the skills she cultivated through playing the piano—breadth of view, acuteness of ear—known that they were being put to this kind of use, what would she have thought?

Leaving that aside, Kazusa cut down on her precious sleeping time to write the following report on Kitahara:

—*Kitahara Haruki leaves a terrible first impression on everyone he meets.*

—*That is because people instinctively avoid his repulsive personality.*

**Anyone who holds a favorable impression of him from the start either has very strange tastes or is an idiot.*

**Such a person has never shown up and will never show up.*

—*However, he overturns that first impression in a matter of days and earns the approval of everyone around him.*

—*He makes this happen through careful, meticulous persuasion, using dirty, cowardly tricks, like the devil itself.*

—*He deliberately causes trouble within the group that includes him.*

—*And by resolving the trouble himself, he flips around the other person's assessment of him.*

—*People put him on such a high pedestal because his troublesome nature aggrandizes his acts of good conduct.*

—*In addition, because everyone's spirits are swept up in the midst of the incident, they can't make level-headed decisions.*

—*In this way, he steadily increases his supporters, and before you know it, he comes to rule the group.*

Kazusa was of no mind to present these dreadful research results anywhere, nor to try to save any of the people whom Kitahara had tainted.

After all, her "research" of him was just a way to kill time.

Yes, these were terrifying truths, but as long as none of the dust fell on Kazusa, it wasn't her business or her problem.

As long as she kept her head down and slept in class, erasing her own presence as much as possible, she wouldn't come under his influence, and neither would she be targeted by his devotees.

She was optimistic about this...

"Good morning, Touma. And happy birthday!"

"...!?"

"It's today, right? May 28th?"

"....."

"Yeah, happy birthday. Well, mine's in April, so I won't treat you as my elder or anything..."

"...!"

So, when he spoke to her that day, she walked away at a pace brisker than usual, fighting back the urge to scream, "W-W-Where the hell did you find that out, you stalker!?"

Two days later, when she saw Kitahara giving birthday greetings to another classmate, she recalled anew that he was just like this with everyone, and without getting excessively self-conscious, she experienced a deep sense of relief.

So much relief in fact, that she found herself kicking the classroom trash can with all her might.

She had meant to continue on like that, not drawing attention, always ignoring Kitahara no matter how many times he came and talked to her, but circumstances did not progress the way Kazusa wanted.

The ones he had brainwashed had started looking at her with lukewarm eyes. In fact, she had actually started to hear people mutter disgusting things like, "We can just leave Touma-san to Kitahara-kun."

In particular, when she heard these lines slip out from the female students who normally derisively called him "Mr. Class Rep," even Kazusa, who was so aloof and solitary, lost sleep from the despair of being left behind.

With all of this, the number of classmates who spoke to her clearly decreased...

With all of this, her irritation with a certain classmate, the only one who spoke to her, increased rapidly.

Kitahara had gotten support from his devotees when it came to handling matters related to her, and being the responsible and dutiful person he was, he spoke to Kazusa almost every day, interfered with her life, worried over her, advised her, and attempted to protect her on various fronts from the teachers and the school.

Kazusa found herself driven into a corner, under such stress that she had considered, more than once, yelling, "What, are you *into me* or something!?" at him, ripping his pride and her own image to shreds, pouring lethal derision onto both of them.

I can't do this anymore. I'm gonna talk to that idiot, just once.

I'll tell him not to bug me any more, not to talk to me anymore.

I'll tell him never to try to deceive me again.

And if he still refuses to comply, I'll just have to resolve it with force.

Because this is my limit.

I'm on the verge of telling him everything that's on my mind...

"Touma, how much more of a burden do you plan to put on Kitahara!?"

"...Eh?"

But, as Kazusa held these thoughts, an interference on Kitahara's behalf came at her from somewhere she never would have imagined.

"Um, Suwa-sensei... I appreciate your concern, but I'm her homeroom teacher, and..."

It was a day in early summer, after end-of-term exams were over, and a momentary relief had spread through the students.

Kazusa, called to the staffroom, was left briefly dumbstruck by this unexpected name, coming from an unexpected party.

"This is what happens when you keep giving her special treatment like this. Touma isn't the prize student of the music program anymore. She's at the bottom of the regular program!"

"Ah... Um, well..."

"....."

Of course, she could imagine the reason for her being called.

She had heard that she was the only one in her class—in her entire year, in fact—who had managed to fail her exams in every single subject.

"It's like you're forcing him to take care of you in everything!"

"...I don't care. I never asked him to."

And, of course, she also understood why things had turned out that way.

She hadn't prepared for her classes, hadn't reviewed, she hadn't even even listened in class, always sleeping at her desk, or pretending to sleep while diligently observing her neighbor. It would have been impossible for her to get more than thirty points on her exams.

"I understand you made Kitahara apologize for the fact that you were the only one who didn't submit your guidance counseling form on time. And you made him lie for you too. He said you mistook the deadline!"

"No, I didn't... The class rep decided to do that on his own."

"So you're putting all of this on him? You're taking advantage of the fact that Kitahara stuck up for you to make everything his fault, and you're just fine with that?"

"...!"

But, in that sense, she wasn't happy at all about being dragged in and blamed for something Kitahara did, when he was one of the reasons she had been too distracted to study.

"Also, Houjou University? Are you joking? Do you think for one second that you'll be able to get a recommendation?"

"The class rep said I could just put anything..."

"Listen to that! Shifting the blame again!"

"....."

Furthermore, the guidance counselor, Suwa, had been Kazusa's natural enemy since the year before...

"You can't keep acting like you're still in the music program! It's causing us nothing but trouble. How long are you going to keep dragging out your first-year glory?"

Ever since the music program as a whole had started to give up on Kazusa, she and Suwa had clashed countless times.

He drew a line, in a sense, between himself and the other teachers who took one look at Kazusa's face and couldn't say anything, even though she was nothing more than a student; he gave all of his advice to her straight, no matter how harsh, holding nothing back, and the things he said were in fact pretty fair and reasonable.

Now, whether Kazusa actually listened to any of it, or spent any time reflecting on it, that was a different story...

When she interpreted his advice as nastiness; his open attitude as arrogance; his reasoning as petty fault-finding; the mere presence of this single, awful middle-aged teacher caused Kazusa's misplaced resentment to take an even deeper root.

"You were admitted here because we had hopes for your prospects as a pianist. We shouldn't have let you transfer in the first place."

"I mean, you could just expel me. If you don't need my family's financial contributions, then by all means..."

"...! What kind of student talks like that!?"

What kind of guidance counselor talks like that!?

"S-Suwa-sensei... why don't we end this here, for today? Touma seems to be reflecting on her actions..."

"Is that how people act when they're reflecting on their actions!?"

Who are you accusing of reflecting?

She could have said it aloud, but the idea of taking Suwa's inflammatory bait made her feel like he was manipulating her, and she wasn't interested in that.

"You don't need to tell me...!"

After slamming the faculty room door shut, Kazusa stormed down the hallway, unable to dispel her anger.

With her comparatively high stature for a girl, long, slender arms and legs, and model-like figure, Kazusa took long strides, making a picture that normally would have captivated any underclassmen who didn't know what she was really like—but the expression plastered on her face did her no favors in terms of elegance.

"I've never heard of a student being allowed to just use a music room alone, whenever she likes."

—*I never asked for it. You all just offered it to me.*

"If your mother could see you now..."

—*This has nothing to do with my mother.*

"If I were in your place, I would feel unbearably guilty for saddling my teachers and parents with this."

—*I'm not like you.*

"Either dedicate yourself to studying and keep up with everyone else, or..."

—*You don't have to tell me. I've had enough of this place anyway...*

"Oh, hey, Touma! There you are!"

"...!"

After she had gone to all the trouble to make herself look unapproachable, the same guy approached her anyway, not paying attention to her face, not reading her mood, not thinking at all.

Today was the end-of-term ceremony, so he should have long since gone home...

"What did they say? It seemed like they were chewing you out for a pretty long time..."

"....."

What did they say? It was awful.

After taking over, her homeroom teacher had carried on like Suwa's yes-man and told her not to cause any more trouble for Kitahara, which only fueled Kazusa's irritation even more.

"Still, did you actually use my notes? At least eighty percent of the questions included material from them..."

"....."

Everyone in the faculty room was on the class rep's side.

Just as Kazusa had once been "the pride of the music program," he was the current "pride of the regular program."

"You'll take the supplementary exams, right?"

"....."

And, though she was a member of the "normal" course now, Kazusa hadn't managed to become normal.

From a special prize pupil to a special disappointment.

The teachers, her classmates, the class rep...

No one would just let Kazusa be.

"It's okay, though. One school term should be enough to recover. We've got summer break coming up, too. It's completely possible. If you'd like, I can—"

"...!"

"Eh...?"

Therefore, just as always...

Kazusa bared her fangs at them all.

"....."

She pierced Kitahara with a gaze so cold that even she thought it might be a bit much, then erased the expression and passed right by him as though nobody were there.

"Ah, um... Touma...?"

All Kitahara could do now was watch her leave, dumbfounded.

This nosy boy, this clueless idiot was frozen just as he had been when they first met.

Kazusa believed, therefore, that this would finally be the end. That he would never try to speak to her again.

If such friendliness were returned with such vicious resentment, then surely anyone would...

"...Idiot."

Even Kazusa wasn't sure whether that word was directed at him, or at herself.

That day, a furious performance could be heard from Music Room 2.

The loud, recklessly fast rhythm reverberating across the whole schoolyard through the open window caused the sports club members to stop their practice several times, staring up in bewilderment at the third-floor. Though the end-of-term ceremony might be over, and even though summer break might have begun, Kazusa was still the Master of Music Room 2.

Then, although it was thoroughly drowned out by the piano, the guitar part from Smoke on the Water blew faintly in the wind.

As Suwa had said, Music Room 2 was an emblem of Kazusa's tyranny.

By the simple fact of her being here and playing the piano, there were people who experienced antipathy, people who were inconvenienced, people who suffered loss.

But she could no longer leave this place.

Because, in the whole of the school, this was the only place where she belonged.

"...!"

Her fingers couldn't keep pace with her feelings. She couldn't regulate the force with which she struck the keys, and her sense of pain started to go numb.

Not just because her skill had decayed, but because, today, Kazusa was clearly, extraordinarily riled up.

The guitar moved on to Nagori Yuki, disregarding the season.

Summer break would start tomorrow. On this critical day, Kazusa's wish to be alone was finally granted.

She had managed to remove the single person who talked to her, the tiresome class rep.

For more than a month they wouldn't see each other, and he would be unable to bridge the gap that had formed between them in that time, and after that, the distance would just keep growing.

She would probably be able to make it all the way to graduation without any more barging-in.

So Kazusa forgot all about what had already happened, and turned her thoughts to tomorrow and thereafter. To summer break, when she could fully savor being alone.

Maybe I'll go on a trip or something.

Some tiny little place, not even big enough to be called a town, where no one knows me.

Shut myself away in whatever place I'm staying, all day long, engulfed in the darkness of solitude.

Ordinary days, no different from the usual...

At some point, the piano's sound had stopped. As she was picturing this delightful vacation, her fingers had stopped moving.

...For some reason, the loneliness that she had brought upon herself with her own two hands was horribly painful.

The guitar moved on, as it always did, to White Album...

"...He's crappy..."

The corners of Kazusa's mouth twitched up as she muttered this, but the area around her eyes was distorted in a way that couldn't really be called smiling.

It was the same terrible guitar she had heard all through the term, having seemingly made little improvement, if any at all.

He would continue with those disharmonious, selfish practice sessions by his lonesome, cutting into Kazusa's performances over and over, making mistake after mistake, not giving up when she stopped, and losing some heart while she was in the middle of playing.

Even though it was obviously a disruption to her, now and then, it seemed as if the other sound was trying to accompany her, and she had been shocked countless times by its shows of egotism.

But...

"Almost..."

His performance of White Album today managed to scrape by with no mistakes, albeit just barely.

Life began returning to her stationary fingers, little by little. She began to feel like she might be able to play just one more song.

Right now, the only thing by Kazusa's side was the clumsy guitar from next door.

Touma Kazusa hated the sky.

She especially detested the deep blue sky immediately after the rainy season had ended, with its great billowing columns of clouds.

She hated the teachers, the students, everything in the world around her.

She especially detested the over-familiar male student, whom she wasn't going to see for a little while.

But this small bit of noise... Touma Kazusa didn't hate that much.

Chapter 2

Summer

The middle of August was approaching, and the high school baseball quarterfinals were ready to go...

And Kazusa was spending a truly appalling summer vacation.

The idea she'd had about going on a trip by herself was abandoned within seconds, with the given reason being "too much of a bother." Left with nothing to do, she lolled around in the giant living room of the Touma residence, running the air conditioner at full power because it wasn't cooling enough, sleeping whenever she felt like it, waking whenever she felt like it.

This slothful lifestyle continued, day after day.

That class rep was probably the thrifty type. What would he say, seeing this way of life, or this month's electrical bill? She was even able to cut herself off from thoughts like that; such was her ability to turn off her mind.

Until two years ago, she had practiced the piano for ten hours a day, every day—whether during school or during summer break. Now, that has reduced to twice a week, maybe three or four hours each time, far from a level that would eat up the twenty-four hours of free time she had.

Still, she'd had a reasonable amount to do in July.

Having quickly given up on the idea of doing absolutely nothing during the break, she started going to driving school on the first day, with the notion of getting her license.

According to the schedule at the outset, she was going to need to attend for at least a month, even if things went well—and really, she should have been busy with on-road training at this point, but... yet again, it became clear that Touma Kazusa and anything with "school" in the name just didn't click.

With her strong innate sense, she was easily able to handle the lessons that most people could clear, and she cleared every practice session in one go as well, then got out of the car immediately for the remaining time.

Even with this student's rampant selfishness, the female instructor who had been assigned to her had a certain friendliness... or one might say timidity, and let it slide for a while.

The fact that this instructor was knocked out of commission with a cold for a few days, shortly after entering the third stage, threw a big wrench into Kazusa's summer vacation.

The middle-aged man who came in as a substitute instructor refused to let Kazusa out of the car even if she cleared the assignment in no time at all, instead demanding that she practice the same thing over and over.

That itself was technically according to the rules, so Kazusa as a student had no right to complain, but everything else about it got on her nerves.

He had a tendency to pick out faults in her driving even when she hadn't made any mistakes. He would use a reproaching tone for every little flaw in every answer she gave. And what was most unbearable of all was the way he kept casually touching her shoulders, hips, and hands...

All of these components reminded Kazusa of a certain teacher, and during her third lesson, she got out of the car with ten minutes to go.

There may or may not have been an instructor nearly passed out from agony in the passenger's seat, clutching a certain area of his body... but regardless, she naturally did not receive her certificate of completion, and Kazusa never returned to that driving school again.

And yet, she now held a brand-new driver's license.

...Because, one week later, she had managed to pass the exam in one try, simply through independent study and practice.

Setting aside practical skill, what would that pedantic class rep have said if he knew that she had scored ninety points in the subject on the first try? She allowed herself to find some satisfaction in the notion.

Kazusa knew.

She knew that she was capable of anything if she set her mind on it. Aside from the piano that her mother had abandoned.

"Guess I'll... get going."

Looking at the wall clock, Kazusa saw that it was three in the afternoon, so she sat up from the sprawling living room floor and began taking off her loungewear.

Her hip-length black hair was briefly lifted up, and the moment her shirt was removed, it flowed down her naked back.

Her ample breasts bounced out, with no bra to confine them, their slight imbalance with her slender body producing its own exquisite sort of balance.

Then, stretching her naked body, she walked to the corner of the room, picked some underwear out of the garments that sat folded there, and casually put them on.

Of course, Kazusa had not set them there herself; it was the helper who came in twice a week, who had laundered them.

Next, she took her uniform, which the helper had also cleaned, from its hanger on the wall, and this, too, slipped casually onto her body.

"...Looks hot outside."

Now that she was nearly dressed, Kazusa looked at the scorching world outside the window, narrowing her eyes slightly at its brightness.

It did seem hot outside, and the weather report had forecasted temperatures in excess of thirty-five degrees Celsius.

In the midst of this heat wave, in her school uniform, Kazusa was about to head for the campus, where her attendance wouldn't even be noted because the break was still on.

For her, this could only be an arduous, pointless, exhausting activity...

"Ugh..."

But, even though she grumbled, Kazusa was in a slightly better mood today, even compared to the self-indulgent, slothful days she had been spending.

Because today was Tuesday.

Which meant there was something just a little bit better than usual.

During summer break, the campus was neither completely still nor especially noisy, enveloped in a sort of mild hustle and bustle.

In the schoolyard, the zealously-training members of the sports club were starting to call out in tired voices as they prepared to pack it up for the day; enthusiastic voices hustled within the school building, ready to move to the main event now that the air had cooled a little.

Kazusa, who had never in her life had anything to do with any of the sports club, quickly ducked into the main building, before ascending the familiar stairs to the third floor.

And, once she reached the third floor, she proceeded down the west hallway containing all the special classrooms, aiming for the one at the very back... Music Room 2.

The fully open windows rendered the soundproofing completely meaningless, and the guitar, drums, and bass coming from the nearby Music Room 1 were almost painfully loud.

But Kazusa didn't react to this racket; and, after carefully checking her surroundings and confirming that she was the only one in the hallway, she unlocked the door to Music Room 2 and quickly slipped in.

Her fluid series of motions didn't stop there. Now, she locked the door again and turned on the lights in the dim room, its curtains shut even though it was daytime.

The true identity of the "Master of Music Room 2" has always been concealed in this way.

The closed-off classroom was, as always, exceedingly humid, and within seconds, she felt as though all the pores in her body had opened up at once.

Kazusa picked up the AC remote controller, and just as she did at home, with no concern for electric bills or the environment, she set the fan to maximum, the temperature as low as it would go, and hit the switch.

Then, finally, she followed through on her original intention, and sat down in front of the piano.

Just as she had in the competition, she sank deeply into the bench, sticking out her backside, and stretched her spine out taut.

However, she did not begin playing immediately.

She set her fingers on the keys, stared into space, and listened to the performance in the next classroom over.

She wasn't focusing her mind, or waiting for her sweat to dry up.

She was waiting for something else.

Five o'clock PM, that's when the band practice next door was supposed to end.

The mediocre drums, being bashed hard enough to drown out all other sounds.

The bass, modest but always stable in its sound.

The somewhat narcissistic guitar.

The inexperienced keyboard.

The female vocalist—well, she wasn't there today. She seemed to be skipping out constantly.

It was probably the light music club, or a band that just came together out of people who were interested. They must be spending all of their time rehearsing, even throughout the summer break, in order to play at the Houjou High School Festival that was coming up that autumn.

That said, the reason that Kazusa still hadn't started playing wasn't because she wanted to avoid disrupting them, or to enjoy their sound.

To Kazusa's ears, listening to a performance like this in the first place was a waste of time.

In other words, the reason she hadn't started playing... The reason she had bothered to take the train to come here, in this heat, even though she had a very high quality piano at home... was, in short, so that she could indulge in an even bigger waste of time.

As she had predicted, a few minutes after five according to the classroom clock, the performance next door stopped.

"Here we go..."

And Kazusa's piano started up quietly, covering over the lingering notes.

Softly and slowly at first, as if it was a test run.

Nonchalantly, so that as far as the people next door, and the sports club members outside could tell, she had been playing for a little while already—just drowned out by the sound of the band.

Kazusa knew.

She knew that Tuesday and Thursday afternoons were their rehearsal times.

This light music club, or this band that came together out of shared interest.

These members of moderate skill levels got together, practiced for two hours, from three to five, tidied up as necessary, and left the classroom around five thirty.

And then...

"...He's crappy."

The guitar part from Stairway to Heaven floated in on the wind, weaving its way through the gaps between the piano's notes.

Yes, Kazusa knew. Or, rather, she had recently deduced the pattern.

That, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons... After the band's rehearsal ended, "Guitar-kun" began his own practice session.

The one behind the sound was probably a member of that band. But she never heard tones like this within the group rehearsal.

In the band, the guitar could get a little carried away, but it was at a relatively listenable level—a different level from this guitar, at least.

In other words, "Guitar-kun" here must be the second guitar, a spare, an errand boy, a handyman.

And he devoted himself to his personal practice sessions like this, staying behind after the other members had left, in an effort to bridge the skill gap between him and everyone else.

Steady, earnest, humble, hardworking...

So Kazusa dubbed the one behind this lousy sound "Guitar-kun," and harbored a secret sort of fondness for... No, her stubbornness wouldn't allow for such a thing.

For some reason, she hated that sort of "effort is a virtue" attitude with a fiery passion. Kazusa believed that results were everything, in all things.

It didn't matter whether those results were reached after lots of hard work, or whether they just happened from pure talent with barely any effort at all. It was certainly far more valuable than a lack of results after working hard.

The guitar moved on to Shourou Nagashi.

For this reason, Kazusa found no value at all in these clumsy sounds. There was just something comfortable about this perfect balance of awkwardness.

Having her own superiority complex satisfied just felt nice. She didn't hate it. That was all...

"Aa-ah..."

Sighing as the guitar slipped out of sync, she kept her piano playing neutral, not dragging, her rhythm and notes remaining accurate always.

She was just listening to the guitar.

She was just playing the piano as she pleased.

The other person might be in the next classroom over, but there was no point of contact between them.

The guitar moved on to White Album, seemingly confident that it could handle this one.

Kazusa had no interest in knowing anything more about her neighbor, Guitar-kun.

After all, she couldn't even find any common ground with her own classmates. There was no way she could hold a conversation with a total stranger. If they did meet face to face, she might stop hearing this sound after next week.

So, just like always, she shut herself away in Music Room 2, turned the AC on at full blast, opened the window, thereby drastically reducing the efficiency of both the air-conditioning and soundproofing—and in this environment, she continued to play the piano, and to listen to the lousy guitar.

With an earth-shaking explosion, a new star was born in the sky, only to fizzle out in an instant.

The second-floor balcony of the Touma residence was a special seat for this once-a-year big bang—the summer festival fireworks display from the next town over.

"...Are you angry?"

"You're asking this *now*? What do you care...?"

But, as Kazusa looked up at the night sky from the balcony, the voice she finally mustered up contrasted starkly with the lively energy of the sky.

In other words, it was a darker, heavier voice than usual.

"I'm apologizing because I do care. The negotiations and everything here are dragging on longer than I thought they would, so I haven't been able to find the time to go back over there for a visit."

"You don't say."

And the voice coming out of the cell phone against Kazusa's ear was apologetic in tone, though not especially dark or heavy.

Did the other party realize that their own light tone had Kazusa's voice stuck in a vicious cycle, sinking lower and lower, heavier and heavier?

"Kazusa, are you listening?"

"I'm listening, and I'm not angry. I'm not a kid any more."

Touma Youko. Kazusa's mother. Her only blood relative.

The one who left her only daughter in Japan, moved to Europe alone, and was the whole reason Kazusa was the way she was now.

"...Also, I never believed a word you said to begin with."

She had known there was no use in hoping. She had thought it wasn't important enough to hope for.

"Oh, I sent you a souvenir, by the way. It should arrive tomorrow."

"Yeah? Thanks."

"I should be able to come back to Japan for a day after my concert in China. Why don't we go get dinner or something?"

This lighthearted promise from Youko—which hardly sounded like the sort of tone a parent would take with her child—was, of course, neglected just as lightheartedly.

This was her third broken promise this year.

...In other words, she hadn't kept even a single promise this year.

"Are you going to school?"

"I'm on summer break right now."

They hadn't seen each other in a year and a half. Kazusa wasn't even sure she could remember her face accurately.

"All right... Well, why don't you come visit Paris, then? I won't be able to spend any time with you, because I'll be getting ready for my next tour, but I can have someone from my staff show you around."

"No thanks. I'm busy, too. As busy as you."

Then again, maybe it was better that she couldn't see her.

...Kazusa couldn't even guess what abuse she might hurl at her own mother if she saw her now.

"If you say so. Well, I'd better go. It looks like we've finally started boarding."

"Okay, bye."

"Oh, but, Kazusa..."

"...!"

At the same moment that the ten-burst finale split the sky, Kazusa's cell phone scattered into pieces, having been flung hard against the balcony.

But she didn't care if it was broken.

The only person who called this phone was the one who had just skipped out on a promise, and wouldn't be coming back to Japan for who knew how long.

"Ha, haha..."

As the fireworks soared into the sky and shone upon Kazusa's profile, the rather pleasant expression she had on her face that afternoon changed in more ways than one.

She hadn't gotten her hopes up.

It hadn't been important enough to hope for.

"I don't care..."

No, she couldn't convince herself that easily. The world still existed purely to hurt Kazusa.

At least, Kazusa had begun to believe that much again.

Even the terrible guitar playing, twice a week.

Even the fireworks that had brightly garnished the night sky until moments ago.

All of it was some trial set by God to further emphasize the contrast with her present despair... or He was just in a sadistic mood.

"I really don't care..."

She felt so stupid. From the bottom of her heart, she felt stupid for having enjoyed herself that day, even if only for a little bit.

Touma Kazusa hated the sky.

She especially detested the starry sky that had suddenly become so desolate, now that the fireworks were over.

The class rep's nosiness. Guitar-kun's terrible playing. Her own inability to learn. She hated it all so immensely that she could cry.

Two days later, Thursday.

Just as she always did on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Kazusa put on her uniform and left the house.

However, it was at a different time from the usual. It was in the morning, under a downpour of blazing sunlight.

Even in her brief ten minutes on the train, she rubbed her sleepy eyes over and over, nodded off several times, and nearly missed the stop at Minami-Suetsugu.

Because ever since the call from Youko two nights ago, she hadn't slept a wink, even though she hadn't taken a single step outside.

Kazusa had not slept in over thirty hours.

At first, the jumble of all the negative feelings in her head disrupted her, so that even if she shut her eyes, she experienced no sleepiness.

Although she was wide awake, she couldn't find the will to do anything; so there, in that sprawling, empty house, she wandered into the maze of her own thoughts, and spent the whole day there.

Then, last night, whether because she had finally broken out of her spiritual prison or because her body had simply reached its limit, she found herself assailed by a fierce drowsiness.

But Kazusa rejected the desire to sleep, this time with a clear-cut volition.

"It's hot..."

It had already struck her as she left the house, but when she got off at Minami-Suetsugu Station, the rays of the sun were more conspicuous than usual.

Because, unlike two days ago, it was the hour at which the heat was nearing its peak. Because her body, after being shut in for two nights, couldn't regulate its temperature well enough to handle that heat.

And, above all, because according to the weather forecast, today was supposed to be the hottest day of the year...

When, with great difficulty, she reached the high school, it was past noon.

She always had to take a detour around the schoolyard, so as not to get in the way of the sports club; but with everyone on lunch break, the yard was empty at the moment, so she cut straight across, rushed to the shoe locker, and rested her hands on her knees, breathing heavily.

Her stamina was at its limit. If she had to walk another five minutes outside in this heat, for all she knew, she could get heatstroke.

After catching her breath for a few more minutes by the shoe locker, she stepped on the pedal for the water cooler. It had clearly already been ravaged by the sports club members as they started their break, and the water that ran down her throat was no cooler than normal tap water.

She winced hard at the first mouthful, but sometimes one just had to make sacrifices; after gulping down the tepid water, she pulled out five or six of the candies she always kept stashed away in her pocket, tossed them into her mouth, and crunched them down.

And after taking in water and calories for the first time in nearly a day and a half, Kazusa finally started dragging her legs in the direction of the third floor.

She was actually so exhausted by the time she reached the campus that she couldn't possibly climb any steps; her brain, at least, had recognized that.

One step, another step, a moment's rest, another step—after taking almost ten minutes to climb less than fifty steps, she finally reached the third-floor hallway...

And a sound reached Kazusa's ears, so off-key that it dispelled the feeling of the labor she had just undergone.

It came from one spot before her usual destination.

From one classroom east of the westernmost end of the hallway.

In other words, it was the lousy guitar she heard from Music Room 1.

"....."

After slowly accustoming her ears to the racket, Kazusa gathered her energy and took a firm step down the hallway.

She wasn't heading toward Music Room 2, of course.

At some point, the sweat that had been gushing out of her whole body had disappeared.

Her flushed face had regained its normal hue.

Her heavy, ragged breathing had perfectly settled.

The usual Touma Kazusa, who was as sharp as a razor, was now complete.

Kazusa knew.

She knew the reason that she had left home earlier than usual today.

It was because she believed he would be here.

Guitar-kun always did his own solo review session after band practice was over. And, knowing him, he would never skimp on pre-rehearsal, either. Why? Because...

"Kitahara...?"

"Wha... Huh?"

The face that turned her way was all too familiar.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you part of the go-home club? It's the middle of summer vacation."

"Can't you tell?"

When Guitar-kun... Kitahara Haruki saw Kazusa's face, he looked startled for half a second, but quickly turned away again, focusing his gaze on his own fingertips and the strings.

This behavior could be taken as embarrassment at seeing someone completely unexpected, or as a lingering bitterness over the manner of their parting during the end-of-term ceremony...

"I can tell that you're playing rather terribly..."

So, Kazusa, in an attempt to figure out the meaning behind his reaction, clumsily piled on the provocation.

"Aren't you also part of the go-home club, Touma? What are you doing at school in the middle of summer?"

"You sure are childish, lashing back at someone the instant they strike a nerve..."

...While feeling a bit more hurt with every response he gave.

"I only started this year. It's a given that I'm somewhat terrible at this right now, isn't it?"

"I mean... you're just holding down chords, right? I can't understand how you could possibly miss."

"That's what everyone says when they've never played it themselves..."

"Hmm..."

"You know, Touma... you should change your tendency of laughing at those who are doing their best."

"Doing their best, huh?"

"In my opinion, anyone who is willing to break a sweat over something is an admirable person. That is, I admire anyone who puts effort in, whether it be physical or mental."

"Hmm..."

Nothing he said was of any interest to Kazusa because she believed that people who produced results were far more impressive than people who struggled.

After all, she wasn't so unfamiliar with the instrument as to be called someone who had "never played it herself."

Moreover, he was worse than "somewhat terrible at it."

"Anyway, what's up today? If you want me to give you supplementary lessons, then wait a little bit until I'm done and I can..."

"Hand it over."

"Eh...?"

Because she knew he had only started this year.

"Hand over that thing."

"Uh, well..."

After all, she had been listening to him play since the beginning...

"Just for a little bit."

"Touma...?"

She held out her hand, and Kitahara, seeming a little bewildered, slowly handed over the guitar.

Kazusa accepted it casually, pulled up a stool, settled herself onto it as deeply as she did with the piano before resting her fingers on the strings of the guitar.

"Ah..."

Playing exactly the same song that he had just been playing, as though it were a different song entirely.

...Showing off to him.

"Ah, um..."

Why? Because that was Kazusa's entire purpose for today.

Not supplementary lessons.

And she wasn't here to play the piano, either, for once.

She simply came to see him.

The boy there in front of her, Guitar-kun, the class rep.

Kazusa had been lying to herself, and everyone else, this whole time.

She knew Guitar-kun's true identity from the start.

The clumsiness of tone, the diligence, the inflexibility, were all unmistakably his.

A few days after she first met him, and stabbed him with the cold blade of her words...

That spring day, when she first heard his sound, and was disgusted with his abysmal performance...

She had realized that the figure she saw from behind, as he left the twilit Music Room 1, was that of the nagging class rep.

"....."

"Guitar-kun" caught his breath.

"Mr. Class Rep" stared at Kazusa's hands and face in alternation.

The skill of her fingers, manipulating the strings with flowing motions.

He stared at her expression, which differed so completely from how she looked in the classroom—serious, but with a hint of enjoyment.

It was a face that Kazusa never made, except on special days.

On the day that she intentionally ignored the class rep's nosiness, for example.

On the day that she poured out a torrent of abuse onto Kitahara after he spoke a word too much, for example.

On the day that she responded to the over-familiar attitude of the classmate who sat next to her with a cold gaze, for example...

On those days that left some sour feeling in her heart, she always waited in the classroom next to this one, waiting for the sound of this lousy guitar playing.

And if her wish was granted, if she did start to hear the tones of the guitar, she would cover it with her piano, or perhaps allow the guitar to take charge, and the two sounds would converse.

This was the face Kazusa made at those times.

The face she made when she arbitrarily decided they had reconciled, and allowed herself to feel relief.

"Thank you."

"....."

After she'd played through the whole thing, she held the guitar out, but its previous owner was completely rigid.

"...Don't you want it back?"

"...!"

No, he was moving just a bit.

"Kitahara...? Are you crying?"

"...I'm sorry. Please don't make me feel any more pathetic than I already am."

His whole body was trembling.

"...Did it hurt?"

"I'm devastated... I've lost all hope in my own talent..."

"This isn't about talent, it's about practice. Like you said, the difference is in how much sweat we've broken over it."

"Eh...?"

At these preachy words, which sounded so much like something he himself would say, Kitahara looked up.

"To learn this, even a little amount of practice should be enough if you do it seriously. You act all high and mighty, but you don't try hard enough."

"No way... I may not be good, but I've been practicing for two hours every day..."

However, the statement that followed—words with a certain weight, coming from personal experience—was a simple, outright lie, purely for the purpose of making herself look good.

Because that "little amount of practice" was entirely too little, and it wasn't persuasive at all.

"This kind of instrument normally takes ten hours of practice a day."

Yes, there had indeed been ten hours of practice in a day.

"No, I'd be a pro if I practiced that much."

"...You wouldn't have to be."

...It was only last night, but it was still ten hours in one day.

"That was amazing, though... Do you play the guitar too, Touma?"

"Nope. I've just been messing around with it for the past few days."

"Don't be going off negating everything you said just now..."

After managing to play through the song with no mistakes, she did a small fist-pump of victory behind her back, but it didn't seem like he had noticed.

"Now, try again from the beginning. I can give you a few pointers to start you off."

"...You sure?"

"I've got time to kill."

"Why'd you come to school during the summer holidays...?"

"Just play already."

"O-Okay..."

At Kazusa's urging, Kitahara set his fingers against the strings once again.

After a single deep breath, keeping a close watch on his hands, he started playing the rhythm, at the same poor tempo.

The sounds that spilled out showed no sign of improvement whatsoever.

"You can start out slowly."

In fact, he was bungling from the very beginning.

"You say I should hurry and play, and then you say I should play slowly..."

"There's a difference in the meaning between both of those. A class representative with excellent grades such as yourself should get the idea, no?"

"...Of course."

"Then, start out slowly."

"Tch...!"

This time, he went a fair bit slower, but with greater certainty.

"....."

Even so, his nearly-six-months' worth of guitar experience was still several levels below what Kazusa had managed in one night of cramming.

"....."

However, maybe that was inevitable, in a sense.

Kazusa, who had been blessed by the god of music since her birth, had focused herself to her utmost limits during those scant ten hours, offering up her prayers.

On top of that, she had come at it with the same unimaginable motivation as the day she touched the piano for the first time.

"Speaking of which..."

"What is it now?"

Purely to create an opportunity for a conversation with this class rep.

"This is the first time you've spoken to me on your own, isn't it?"

"...You're just imagining things."

That was how badly she had wanted to interact with someone.

Not just anyone, of course. In fact, there was only one person it could possibly be. Not just by process of elimination, but out of multiple choices...

"Thank you."

"You're so crappy."

She had no choice but to acknowledge it now. That, whether she liked it or not, she needed this nosy class rep who would never leave her alone.

That night, Kazusa still couldn't sleep.

Her body's exhaustion had passed its peak, to the point that she couldn't take a single step, and she took a taxi home from the high school, where she collapsed into bed without even getting changed. But her brain stubbornly refused the temptation of sleep.

There were too many thoughts racing around in her head, and it seemed unlikely she would be able to fall asleep until she collected herself to a certain extent.

Well, this isn't good.

Granted, at least ninety percent of these many unresolved questions pertained to the school festival coming up in three months.

In the end, Kazusa had only spent about an hour teaching Kitahara how to play the guitar.

The other party had seemed more than prepared to ask for an entire day's worth of instruction, but she had cut off his question in the middle, with an air of irritation, and left right away.

Because, even though he might have forgotten about it completely, she remembered.

That, if she continued the lesson, his fellow band members would show up for their rehearsal, and witness the unusual scene playing out.

How am I supposed to bring that idiot in line with everyone else?

As she turned over in bed for the hundredth time, Kazusa pondered the reality of the shock she had finally experienced today, sighing.

That there were pitiful people in the world who couldn't get their fingers to move the way they wanted them to...

Kitahara... Guitar-kun... She understood the patterns in his playing, somehow.

Basically, as his fingers could only respond to what he was thinking in his head, his thinking speed must not be particularly fast.

With the behaviors, thoughts, grades, and deliberation of a standard honors student all piled up on top of each other, there was no room for muscle memory to wedge itself in.

Put simply, he was smart, but his intuition was dull.

Lately, Kazusa had taken immense pleasure in being able to look down so completely on the class rep who always (at least in her eyes) acted so condescendingly to her, and it was with that sense of superiority that she had taught him so meticulously, but in the end, she couldn't keep a certain feeling of frustration from welling up inside her.

Why isn't this going better?

He's working hard.

No one can beat him when it comes to studying and effort...

So why isn't God rewarding him?

Kazusa was forced to realize that she didn't understand anything.

That there was an unbridgeable gap in ability lying between them, cultivated over the years that they had been alive.

While he spent ten hours a day facing his desk, Kazusa spent ten hours a day facing the piano.

While he was studying for more than ten years, Kazusa was handling a musical instrument for more than ten years.

As a result, he couldn't catch up to Kazusa. Kazusa couldn't even see that he was behind her.

Yes, effort led to success.

In that sense, Kazusa's blunt declaration that Kitahara wasn't "working nearly hard enough" was true.

But Kazusa's single night of guitar cramming had more than ten years of "ten-hours-a-day" piano practice as a foundation.

The half a year he spent practicing had no musical training to back it up.

Kazusa, who had always dealt with everything by instinct and wasn't used to thinking things through logically, hadn't realized this simple fact until now.

That said, they couldn't change anything about those years that had led up to this point.

All that he could change, all that Kazusa could change, were the three months coming up.

So, what now?

How do we get to a point where this guy can actually play...?

And so, Kazusa thought about it.

She racked her brain hard, in a way that she had never done in her life.

For Kitahara, this sort of mulling might be no more of an exertion than an after-dinner exercise. He might have come up with a solution in a matter of seconds.

Even so, Kazusa thought as hard as she could.

She pondered about a way to turn terrible guitar playing into not-great guitar playing.

She pondered about a way to keep the audience from laughing, at least, if by some mistake he were to have to fill in at the school festival concert.

She contemplated, worried, writhed...

At some point, the piano, her mother, herself... All had been forgotten, and she thought of nothing but him.

It was late August now.

The high school baseball season was over, and the Bon Festival and sea-bathing season had long since passed...

Kazusa was so busy that her eyes were practically spinning.

That day—that Thursday, two weeks ago—Kazusa's summer break had ended.

Rumors about the girl who had shown up nearly every day for the past several days, carrying a heavy musical instrument into the school building, then staying cooped up in Music Room 2 all day, instead of participating in any supplementary lessons or club activities, had started to spread among the members of the sports club.

At the end of last week, a delivery truck had suddenly pulled up at the school grounds, and when they tried to haul in a large quantity of equipment, it caused some trouble with the school faculty who didn't know anything about it.

Through all of this, Music Room 2, which had been almost barren of anything useful aside from the piano, came to be quite busy before long.

Now, there was a drum set, a bass, a saxophone, and any other number of instruments—a lineup not to be outdone by Music Room 1 next door.

And, to the trained eye, it might have been apparent that those instruments were all about one order of magnitude greater in cost than those supplied by the school.

These instruments were brought in from the Touma residence's private studio, which was of a quality that was unimaginable to ordinary people and would have left them speechless.

And today, on the final Tuesday of the month...

In the completely transformed Music Room 2, there was Kazusa, sitting deeply on the bench, just like always.

She set her fingers on the keys, stared off into the distance, and didn't move a muscle.

Waiting, with her mind focused, but still relaxed. It was almost time for "pre-rehearsal"...

From the perfectly silent hallway, from the open window, the sound of a solitary guitar floated on the breeze.

"He's still playing El Condor Pasa? Seriously...?"

As dizzied as she was by this utterly amateurish choice of a song, Kazusa's body still stiffened up with excitement at the arrival of what she had been waiting for.

She dropped her eyes to the keyboard, lightly raised her arms, took one deep breath, and...

The breeze carried the piano accompaniment out of Music Room 2.

It was El Condor Pasa, of course.

Not just following along with the sound, like before, but adding to it.

She couldn't let the other sound be.

Then, the guitar stopped. One beat later, the piano accompaniment stopped as well.

Right about now, someone from the classroom to the east must be peering out the window at the classroom to the west, making a puzzled expression.

However, as the heavy curtains over this window were drawn shut, and he couldn't see inside, he picked up the guitar again, his head still turned...

And, once again, the guitar part from El Condor Pasa began to play.

One beat later, the piano accompaniment began.

It was almost as though the sound of the piano, as nosy as a certain class rep, was leading the guitar.

This time, the guitar did not stop its performance.

He just left it to his own ability, and kept plunking along, tempo and pitch both divergent, so clumsy that he could never have looked the song's composer in the face.

And the piano—Kazusa—lectured him with its sound.

It lectured him on the intention of the composer, the true beauty of this song, and the many mistakes in his playing.

Without a word, she drummed it all into him.

Single-mindedly, at the correct tempo, with the correct pitch.

Pulling him back if he ran ahead, waiting for him if he fell behind.

Directing him down if he went too high, up if he went too low, setting him right if he slipped completely out of place.

She continued playing, remaining patient until he accompanied her.

"You're as crappy at this as it gets, Kitahara..."

The one who accepted this display of dedication the most readily—something that anyone who knew her would scarcely have believed—was, of all people, Kazusa herself.

The connection of these sounds, done half in fun, felt incredible.

She felt something worthwhile in the guitar sound that pulled the sound of her piano down so far.

In trying to teach him the guitar, she felt the limits of teaching with words.

She didn't know how to convey something that she could do without even thinking about it.

All she could find to say was, "I don't know, I can just play it."

So, Kazusa decided to use sound.

This way, she could correct his sound without using words.

This was the practicing method that she had devised after a good deal of thinking that she wasn't used to.

At first, she got both of them familiar with her strong point, the piano; then, gradually, she exposed him to the instruments that made up a band.

Guitar, drums, saxophone...

She would make Kitahara Haruki a guitarist that wouldn't be embarrassed to stand on stage three months from now.

...That was the whole purpose.

At her suddenly busy days, here in the final stage of summer break, Kazusa heaved a sigh of pleasant exasperation.

Chapter 3

Autumn

"Oh, hey, good morning, To..."

"Hey, class rep? Kitahara!"

"Ah, yes!?"

"We've got something that needs handing out. Can you come to the faculty room? The deadline for collecting them is tomorrow, actually..."

"...How long have these been sitting on your desk?"

"...Don't worry about the details. Just take care of it right away, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll see what I can do."

"Sorry to put this on you again. Anyway, take these. Careful, they're pretty heavy."

.....

Two weeks after the end of summer break...

It was mid-September, and both students and teachers had just about stopped dragging out the summer break.

"Oh, Kitahara-kun, sorry to grab you like this during lunch, but do you have a minute?"

"What? Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, a pretty serious one... Look, today's the regular library board meeting, right?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it... Huh? But, what about Harada-san...?"

"Exactly... Hiromi's out with a cold, and we need a substitute."

"Ah..."

"We *need* a substitute."

"This doesn't really have anything to do with me, though, right?"

"No, it doesn't."

"...So what are you smiling for?"

"Apparently they're talking about some pretty important stuff today. Hiromi begged us to find someone..."

"....."

"....."

"...It's happening right now, in the library?"

"I knew we could count on you, Class Rep! You're always so dependable, whether it's necessary or not!"

"Yes, yes. More importantly, if I'm late for fifth period, will you explain it to the teacher for me?"

"Sure will! I'll even answer roll call for you, if you want!"

"No, I'd rather you didn't do that, with your voice..."

...!

Kitahara Haruki, the class representative of Class 3-E, was being pushed around by everyone around him, just like always—maybe even more than before.

On top of his usual work as class representative, there were the orders from the teachers, who depended on him for the past three years. There were the minor tasks from his classmates, whose confidence he had newly won. And...

"Hey, Haruki, let's go."

"Chikashi..."

"We set up our homepage. It's just a start, but it's something. So, I was hoping we could get your opinion on some stuff..."

"Can't the committee members figure something out for that?"

"No, no way! Those guys don't have any skills or ideas. Every single one of 'em said 'Whatever Haruki says goes.'"

"...Look, I'm not part of that committee this year."

Moreover, he had to assist the school festival committee which had also sprung into action with the beginning of the second term, leaving him with almost no free time during breaks or after school.

"You're regretting leaving the upperclassmen alone and taking charge for the past two years, huh."

"Well, I don't think that was a good thing for the upperclassmen, either. But this year..."

"What, band practice? But you're not actually gonna perform, right? So who cares if you don't show up at every rehearsal?"

"Maybe, but... you never know."

"What, do you seriously believe Takeya is gonna get sick or something? He'd be more likely to get stabbed by some girl."

"...And you think the likelihood of that is low?"

"C'mon, c'mon. We won't get anywhere without you!"

"Whoa, let go! Alright, I will, just hang on a second!"

...!

"Later, Touma!"

"....."

"...Careful on your way home!"

"....."

"Let's go, Haruki!"

"O-Okay..."

Without receiving any response from Kazusa, who had been staring out the window from the next seat, showing no interest in the exchange playing out, Kitahara—who was not actually part of the festival committee, but an important part of the main staff anyway—was all but dragged out of the classroom by Hayasaka, with whom he had grown close enough to be considered "good friends."

For the next few seconds, a certain someone took the time to settle her breathing...

"...!"

Fortunately, the racket of the entire window-side row of desks being toppled like dominoes that immediately followed did not reach Kitahara's ears as he walked down the hallway.

That day, in Music Room 2, a tempestuous performance took place, with a certain fighting spirit that had not been present for quite a while.

This single piano was enough to drown out the rehearsal of the wind ensemble on the first floor, and this show of "derision from the music program" only served to lower the ensemble members' motivation.

Today, however, the solo guitar did not mix itself in with the loud reverberations of the piano.

As a result, the voltage of Kazusa's performance kept on increasing.

Of course, it wasn't because she could play more comfortably without that clumsy racket to afflict her—nothing quite so positive...

"That yes-man! Doormat! Opportunist! Evasive bastard!"

She played at *fortissimo* so that no one else would hear her tirade.

Since the end of summer break, Kazusa and Kitahara had barely exchanged a word.

It was bad enough that she wondered what the point of their dramatic chance encounter that day had even been.

The rest of the world probably would have understood it this way: the delinquent girl ignored the class rep entirely, no matter how cordial he was with her or how much he spoke to her.

"Why aren't you coming to practice!? Do you not understand that you have zero time left!?"

But the truth... well, the truth within Kazusa was the complete opposite, and the fact that things had reached this state of crisis was all on Kitahara.

True enough, Kazusa had been completely ignoring all of Kitahara's appeals to her for the past several days.

But it wasn't because she refused to respond to him, regardless of what he said.

As far as Kazusa was concerned, the entire problem was that he wasn't saying the right things.

"*Good morning!*" — Whatever.

"*Goodbye!*" — Couldn't care less.

"*Did you do your homework?*" — Not even worth a glance.

"*I want you to teach me more about the guitar.*" — Why couldn't he just say that...?

"That's why you haven't improved at all! You don't know a thing!"

After about twenty days of teaching him remotely from Music Room 2, Kazusa had hit a wall.

She had provided him with all of the support she could give—helping him with the piano, the bass, the drums, and with every bit of her talent, knowledge and genius. Nevertheless, the student who became prodigal through sheer hard work still didn't show any sliver of progress in learning to play these instruments properly.

She couldn't get a grasp of the limits of his abilities, his potential for growth or the speed of his development. She found herself recalling how vexed she felt as a child, when her friends dropped out of their piano class one by one, and her social group steadily vanished.

And so, Kazusa got more and more irritated.

Now that she thought about it, maybe the whole thing was hopeless from the start.

She was a coach with hardly any... no, with absolutely no patience at all.

The fact that she lacked any teaching experience—rather, a lack of communication skills in general—meant that attempts to come to a mutual understanding were unconvincing.

...What kind of rehearsal routine was this, anyway? No contract, no knowledge of the mentor's true identity, no notion of whether he recognized her as a mentor in the first place.

...The more she thought back on it, the more it seemed to her like she had left too much up to chance. In a way, that might have led the class rep to lecture her for being unreasonable.

"Goddamn amateur... Don't you have any sense of urgency...!?"

And in her impatience, she muttered things she didn't really mean, then started to fear that what she said had been the truth in her mind, which worsened her anxiety, throwing her into a vicious cycle.

Of course, Kazusa didn't realize it.

She didn't realize that serious symptoms were sprouting up within her.

That the impatience, the irritation, the anger she was feeling was over somebody else, when she had barely even looked at anybody else for the past several years.

"Good morning. You're five minutes later than usual today."

"....."

"Your eyes are red, too. I've never known you to stay up late. Did you nap too much during the day, so you couldn't sleep at night?"

"....."

"Oh, or maybe you were preparing for next week's proficiency tests...? No, sorry. Forget what I just said."

"...Aaargh..."

"Anyway, keep your focus up today... No, hey, don't go back to sleep already. What's the point of coming to school if that's all you do?"

Kazusa, having to deal with this clueless yammering after finally being through with her homeroom teacher's nastiness, fell forward onto her desk in an exaggerated way, as if to say, "Do whatever the hell you want, I don't care any more."

"...You seem seriously exhausted. What were you doing last night?"

"....."

Whose damn fault do you suppose this is?

She swallowed this gripe before it could leave her mouth.

As Kitahara had pointed out, she had barely slept at all the night before, engrossed in a sort of pensiveness with which she had been unfamiliar to this point.

Brooding over pitiful Kitahara, and his threefold handicap: he could hardly practice because he was so busy, the practicing he did manage didn't bring any improvement, and he showed no sign whatsoever of being concerned about this.

"We've got Suwa for first period, so you should probably try to at least *appear* awake."

"....."

Do you really understand where things stand?

There's no way you'll be ready for the school festival at this rate.

Even your little "memory-making" notion is on shaky ground.

Even as she flagrantly ignored her neighbor's gaze, Kazusa's head was full of nothing but said neighbor.

I'll have to tell him directly after all.

I'll have to shove the truth in his face, like I did over summer break...

Since last night... no, since yesterday afternoon... no, since the start of this week, she had worried and fumed more than the guy himself had, and ended up only going in circles, with no progress made.

But wouldn't that be way too pushy?

Like the sort of thing Kitahara always does.

Why should I have to do something like that, in the first place?

There's no reason for me to go that far for an idiot like him...

"...Yes, there is."

"Hm? What is?"

"Shut up. None of your business."

"...Whatever."

Think about how much I've suffered because you insisted on butting in, you idiot.

In that case, who could blame me for retaliating a bit?

Kazusa was dead tired. That was almost certainly what led her into this inversion of priorities.

Yeah. I'll let him have it.

I'll point out every little mistake he makes, in minute detail.

I'll teach him what a shameless, hypocritical thing he's been doing.

Music? I can do that.

There's no way I'll fall behind this dumbass in anything that's not studying.

Yeah, that's it. I'll push him so hard that he'll never be able to play the guitar again, out of sheer embarrassment.

The fact that playing a live show was his goal was a stroke of bad luck for Kazusa. To her, failing at a recital was absolutely unthinkable.

She would start her intensive practicing more than a month in advance, sparing not a second for sleep, playing and playing until no matter how rigidly nervous she was—no, even if she were to lose consciousness—her body would still be able to reproduce what she had practiced on its own.

That was the norm for her, until two years ago. She never found it painful or difficult.

When it came to music, and music alone, she was way more diligent than he was, and she allowed for no compromise.

Don't resent me for this, Kitahara...

We were both unlucky.

That was what Kazusa told herself.

That, were it not a matter of music, she wouldn't have involved herself this deeply.

She was supposed to have thrown away this pride two years ago... but she chose not to think about that right now.

Now that I've decided, it's simple.

I'll take action after school today...

"Hey, Touma, would you mind hanging around a little bit before you leave?"

"...Huh?"

And, after school...

Kazusa's initiative was suddenly stolen.

"I want to talk to you about something... but only once everyone else has left."

"J-Just... the two of us?"

"I mean, I guess so. That's what you would prefer anyway, right?"

"Wha...!?"

Kitahara's invitation, delivered openly in front of everyone, completely put to waste the strategy that Kazusa had spent the entirety of their class time considering—how to start talking to him without everyone noticing, how to get him alone without causing any suspicion—and it left her unnecessarily flustered.

"Ki-Ki-Ki..."

"See ya, Haruki. Thanks in advance for the physics notes tomorrow!"

"Yeah, see you... Hey, why don't you take them, for once?"

"Bye, Kitahara-kun!"

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

"...tahara?"

But in spite of Kazusa's immense agitation, their classmates just strolled right by the two of them, exchanging seemingly habitual parting greetings with Kitahara.

They showed no sign of teasing the two of them. It was clear from their faces that they were simply observing the usual scene of the class rep's futile meddling being ignored by the delinquent girl, as though it were something fascinating.

"Mind locking up, Class Rep? I'm heading out."

"Yes, I'll bring the keys back to the faculty room. See you."

In other words, there was no misunderstanding whatsoever.

"....."

The lack of unnecessary prying from others should have been something desirable to Kazusa, but she was at that complicated age where she still couldn't feel completely satisfied—she couldn't keep from feeling the tiniest bit of something like humiliation.

Whether it was how trusted the class rep's character was, or that the delinquent girl's misanthropy had soaked in...

"So, what I wanted to talk about..."

"Eh?!"

And while she was imprisoned by these unhappy thoughts, before she realized it, they were the only two left in the classroom.

In other words, Kazusa was hanging around a little bit before leaving, just as she had been asked.

"I'm sorry, I actually wanted to talk to you right after the end of summer break. I've just been really busy lately..."

"I... I'm leaving!"

"Eh? Why?"

"I don't care if you're busy or not, I've got nothing to talk to you about!"

But she had had something to talk about.

She had been planning to just before.

"I get that, but it's just for a second..."

"Shut up. I said I'm leaving. Back off."

She had been waiting for the right timing to talk to him since the middle of the end-of-day homeroom. The fact that he spoke to her first should have been a godsend.

"Didn't you stick around this long so you could hear what I had to say...?"

"What kind of stuck-up delusion are you spouting, you idiot? You think I would just go along with whatever you tell me to do, idiot? Here, let me run that by you again. Idiot."

"But I... Touma, when we were on summer break..."

"I have no goddamn idea what you're talking about."

"...Hey."

This conversation was moving farther and farther away from her intentions, and the one freaking out about it most was Kazusa herself.

"Anyway, I'm busy. I don't have time to run along with every bit of pointless rubbish you throw at me. Move."

This situation, the two of them alone in the classroom at dusk—Kazusa was thousands of times more stoked about it than anyone else, and probably more than the boy here with her, too. It was too much, way too much...

"I told you, it won't take that long—"

"I said move!"

"Oh, hey, there you are, Haruki!"

"...!?"

This sudden, excessive new noise blasting into the stillness of the classroom made Kazusa's heart jump even higher.

"Chikashi? You're still here?"

"Ah..."

Had she been a little calmer, she would have known immediately that the noise came from the classroom door being flung open, and the slightly over-familiar voice of Hayasaka, Kitahara's sudden new best friend.

"Of course I'm still here. I gotta take you with me."

"...Eh?"

She would also have realized what this over-familiar best friend was after.

"Wait, don't tell me you're still..."

"I mean, like, I thought your suggestions yesterday were great, but the other guys are coming in with this and that and whatever, even though they aren't actually doing anything..."

"So they didn't agree with, 'what Kitahara says goes' at all."

"Please, Haruki! You're the only one who can shout these morons into submission!"

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm not on your committee?"

"Don't be like that, now's not the time! Our festival is in crisis!"

"I don't think you're feeling a sense of crisis at all, though."

"....."

And, unfortunately, Kazusa did know one thing. Kitahara's next line in the course of this development was all too predictable...

"Sorry, Touma... Could you wait a second?"

"As if."

So she felt that her curt reply came off naturally.

"I promise I won't be long. I'll be back in ten minutes!"

"Yeah, it won't even take five. C'mon, Haruki."

"L-Look... even Chikashi is saying so."

"In five minutes I'll be at my own front door."

"T-Touma..."

Yes, it was curt. Blunt. Thoroughly dry in tone.

Not even the faintest hint that she was grinding her teeth escaped.

"He'll be right back! Okay? Stay there!"

"Hey, don't speak for—Whoa, whoa, don't pull me! Look, I'll be right back, so..."

"....."

"Ha, haha..."

"....."

"Come on, Haruki!"

"Yeah, I'm coming..."

Assuming that Kazusa, who had turned away and was packing her things getting ready to leave, had ignored the end of what he said, Kitahara—not a member of the school festival committee, but apparently their chairman regardless—was dragged out of the classroom by Hayasaka for the second day in a row.

And, for the next few seconds, the girl took the time to settle her breathing...

"...I'm leaving."

But, today, she just slumped her shoulders, exhausted.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon.

The setting sun, dyed red, shone into the classroom at a low angle.

"....."

In this space dominated by stillness, the one who had muttered "I'm leaving" an hour and a half ago remained slouched over on her desk, staring vacantly at the glow of the sky.

She had spent nine times ten minutes or eighteen times five minutes in idleness, and then she burned the steady shift of the light in the classroom from bright white into dim red into her eyes in real time.

"....."

She had tried to leave the classroom a number of times.

In fact, she had actually stepped out a few of those times.

Just once, she had made it to the shoe locker, and even changed her shoes.

However, for some reason, once it was time to progress beyond that point, she couldn't move; and when she turned around, she suddenly found herself moving double-time. She had cursed her feet over and over for it.

"....."

Her brain, even with its sleep deficit, refused to let her rest.

All it did was churn out guess over guess concerning what he wanted to talk about.

Maybe he had finally acknowledged his lack of training and had come to beg for guidance.

Though, if he really had a sense of the danger he was in, maybe he wouldn't have been dragged off by the festival committee like that.

Maybe he had realized the true identity of the Master of Music Room 2.

But if he had, what would he say? And how should she respond to it?

If he knew who she was, what kind of feelings would he have toward her?

And what would he say to her, as a result of that...?

"...Like I care."

As she muttered this bluff that no one would hear, Kazusa was on the verge of tears over how pathetic she was, trapped in this unlikely situation, waiting and waiting for this male classmate of hers in a darkening classroom.

...Now it was seven o'clock.

The sunset had quickened and finally passed, and the first star was gleaming in the fully darkened sky.

"...!"

In this space, dominated not only by stillness but also by darkness, the one who had muttered "I'm leaving" three and a half hours ago looked up at the soon-to-be-starry sky, shocked by the extent of her own stupidity.

"...!"

Even the vaguest movement was too much trouble now.

The security guard had finally come by to warn her.

However, she somehow managed to remain there under the pretext of staying here due to being part of the school festival committee—an outright lie that she only recognized in her mind—as well as her calling card as "Touma-san's daughter."

"...Ha, haha..."

She couldn't help but laugh at herself, waiting and waiting like a faithful dog.

"I want to talk to you about something..."

She stayed here in her chair in this classroom because she had been told, "Sit!"

"Could you wait a second?"

She was unable to leave the school building because she had been told, "Stay!"

By this stupid class representative, who came running to her at the worst times, but treated her like a pet dog as soon as she showed a tiny bit of modesty...

The most ridiculous thing was that, even so, her current situation was just a bit more comfortable than spending time at home, where there was no one else.

"...No, I'm going. I'm leaving. I'm out."

Nevertheless, Kazusa made up her mind that this time would be the one.

"I'll be back in ten minutes!"

If he didn't come back in the next ten minutes.

It was eight... thirty.

She didn't know whether it was the day of the harvest moon, but the moon floating in the sky was nearly a perfect circle.

She never would have seen a view this picturesque if she hadn't stayed in the classroom this late.

So did Kazusa take some time to reflect upon this gift, born of pure chance?

"What the hell is that idiot doing...!?"

...Of course not. The cacophony, following this exclamation, of every desk in the classroom being kicked over one by one, echoed in vain down the deserted hallway.

"Hey, I'm sorry about yesterday!"

"...I'm leaving."

"Ahh! Wait, wait!"

The next day, before school...

Kazusa saw the class rep from a distance, loitering around at the school gate as though waiting for someone, but she waited until he had gone to the trouble of walking up to her and apologizing before turning around with a flagrant look of disgust on her face.

"No, really, I'm sorry. The business with Chikashi wound up taking a bit longer than I assumed it would..."

"So? I just went straight home."

"Oh..."

Taking no notice of his nonsense excuse, Kazusa let her feet carry her further and further away from the campus. In other words, in order to be able to converse with Kazusa, he would have to risk being late himself...

"So?"

"Huh?"

"...Just for reference, how long did it take?"

"Oh, I mean... Just a little bit longer."

"...Actually, I'm leaving after all."

"Ahh! No, wait!"

She knew that "just a little bit" was a complete lie.

However, as she had *supposedly* gone straight home, Kazusa couldn't point out the lie, and had no other option but to put distance between herself and the school and get revenge that was equal to her stress.

"Sorry, that wasn't entirely true... It was a little more than just a bit."

"Just tell me!"

"Um... Until just before nine."

"Heh... Hmmmm."

By the time Kazusa finally left the classroom feeling disappointed, it was already 8:50...

Realizing that waiting *just ten more minutes* would actually have worked this time caused Kazusa's irritation to rise exponentially.

"Then I left the building at 9:30, after setting all the desks and chairs back up..."

"Oh, yeah... Must've been an earthquake."

"An earthquake, restricted entirely to our classroom?"

"Well, it's not like I care either way."

As such, she firmly made up her mind not to apologize.

"Anyway, again, I'm really sorry. If we could talk after school today, instead..."

"No. No way. I'm not gonna waste my time."

And to never again accept requests from this guy, since he clearly wouldn't follow through...

"...I thought you might say that. Could we just take a second now?"

"....."

With this difficult-to-refuse favor coming just as she was trying to resolve herself, she was once again at a loss for words.

"We can talk here by the road, or in that park over there, wherever. Please?"

Being clever and sly like this was a distinct characteristic of his, and it was a facet that was difficult to tolerate.

"If we loiter like that, we'll be late."

"...Then, could we turn around and start heading back toward the school, at least?"

"....."

Being stubborn and unreasonable like this was a distinct characteristic of Kazusa's, and it was a facet that was rather shameful.

"If we run, we'll make it in time. What I want to talk about really is that short."

"....."

"You know, Touma, you showed up to school earlier today than I thought you would..."

"If you've got something to say, say it. Don't keep pausing to act high-and-mighty. Idiot."

In the end, unable to tell him that she hadn't slept two nights in a row out of anger, she had no choice but to fold.

"Listen, um... I know it's been a while, but I wanted to thank you for what you did during summer break."

"...You've been chasing me around over something that stupid?"

"It may seem stupid to you, but it wasn't to me."

"....."

They had moved to the small park by the roadside, and as they sat side-by-side on the bench, Kazusa was quite aware of the fact that they might look like they were on a date; and Kitahara's words, which themselves brought a date to mind, had a fairly strong impact on her.

"It made me really happy. I was sure no one could possibly take any interest in my guitar playing."

"I'm not interested. I was just sick of the racket."

"I know I said this already, but I only just started playing the guitar this year. And I've had to teach myself, since I'm not getting any real lessons. As you pointed out, I developed some weird habits in my playing..."

"Those aren't habits. They're proof of the limit of your ability."

"Regardless, you were a big help, and I really appreciated it... Thank you."

"...I don't care."

Her face was hot.

All these words she hadn't heard in the past several years—"appreciated," "thank you," and so on—embarrassed her so much that her whole body felt itchy, and brought about another, different sort of feeling as well.

"Honestly, I was on the verge of giving up. I felt like I hadn't made any improvement at all before summer break, even with all the practicing I was doing."

Oh, don't worry. You weren't mistaken.

"But ever since that day, I've gradually started feeling some effect. I mean, sure, only a tiny bit at a time, but..."

You're not mistaken there either. You're only improving a tiny bit at a time.

"I feel like I'm on the verge of grasping something... Like playing is getting more fun or..."

If that's how you feel, then play more. Practice. Quit bothering me.

"....."

It was such a corny speech, fully loaded with openings for her to counter.

And yet, for some reason, she couldn't find it in herself to interrupt him right now.

She didn't want to shut him up with her own voice. She wanted to keep listening.

Listening to his words of praise for her.

Listening to the acknowledgement of the ways she had helped him.

"So, I'm really grateful to you. I owe you a lot. I know I've said this a hundred times already, but thank you."

"....."

Listening to the slight sweetness in his words, which could have been interpreted as a confession depending on the circumstances.

After all, Touma Kazusa loved all sweet things, not just pudding...

"And... here."

"Huh...?"

And carrying on in the same blunt, straightforward manner, Kitahara Haruki took a paper package out of his bag and held it out to her.

"I hope you like it..."

The present was just like him—simply wrapped, but carrying strength, tension, and sincerity.

...No matter how she tried to twist her interpretation of it, that was the only way she could perceive it.

"Kitahara..."

"...!"

This time, his face seemed to be heating up.

There was too much sweat on his forehead to ascribe it to simple leftover summer heat.

"Um, what is the meaning of this...?"

"You'll see when you open it."

As hard as it was to believe given her figure and looks... Kazusa had never been given such a straight pitch up until now, and in a manner that was so direct, no less.

Whenever some sort of sentiment was conveyed to her like this, it was while she had no regard for anything outside the piano.

When she quit looking at the piano, she quit being someone who inspired these sorts of feelings in other people.

That's why...

"....."

While she could have torn him apart verbally, she could have rejected him, she could have derided him, Kazusa simply snatched the package away from him wordlessly, and opened it with great seriousness on her face.

Forgetting that, if there was true sincerity inside the present, she ought to have some kind of answer prepared...

"...What is this?"

"Chlorophyll Publishing's Sprout Series #16: Foundational English Grammar."

"...Huh."

The "wrapping paper," which was actually a paper bag from a bookstore, was crushed and crumpled up.

"I looked really hard for it. It's from a minor series, so they don't sell it in small bookstores."

A reference book.

"I can vouch for it, though. I used it in middle school. It helped me a lot with exams and stuff."

For middle school students.

"Like I said, I hope you like it..."

"....."

"Anyway, why don't we head back to school? We should still be able to make it in..."

"Before that, can I ask you one thing?"

"Eh? What is it?"

"Why would you give me this...?"

It certainly was a straight pitch. A pitch that kept her solidly at arm's-length.

"Well, I mean, the day before yesterday, Takemura-sensei said you didn't even know the basics of English grammar..."

"....."

Of course she didn't.

Because every time she was called on in class, she ignored it completely.

...No matter what class.

"So, after class, I walked all the way to the Kitaguniya bookstore in Onjuku..."

"The day before yesterday..."

The day that Kazusa spent waiting in vain in Music Room 2...

When he hadn't shown up to practice, it wasn't because he'd been trapped by the school festival committee. It was...

It was because he was off looking for this meaningless thing...

"Oh, I don't want you to think I'm mocking you just because it's for middle school students. It wouldn't be ideal to just give you something that's more difficult all of a sudden when it comes to things like this."

"....."

"Right now, I get the feeling that you don't even know which parts you struggle with. It's during times like these you should go back to the very fundamentals of something. Once you get a grasp of that, you'll be surprised at how far you can progress."

"....."

"I'm just kidding. Actually, what made me think of this was..."

"...ot."

"Eh?"

"Are you... an idiot?"

Kazusa felt dizzy.

"...You know, I've been meaning to tell you this for a while, Touma, but you shouldn't be so quick to call people idiots."

"You skipped out on practicing the guitar so you could go look for a reference book?"

"Eh?"

She had lamented his evident lack of any sense of urgency, but figured there wasn't too much she could do about that.

At least as long as he remained incapable of saying "no" to people when they asked him for things.

Yet despite that...

"I told you to play. Every day. I said it didn't have to be ten hours a day, but at least ten minutes. I told you to never skip it."

That summer day, in the music room filled with clumsy guitar.

"I told you you weren't getting better because you weren't working hard enough. That if you really, seriously exerted yourself, even with a little amount of practice, you'd be able to play."

"Touma..."

"Nothing has changed, Kitahara! What, you think you're gonna be able to perform well at the school festival if you keep this up...?"

She might not have been all that articulate, but she'd meant what she said. And he just ignored it...

"No, listen..."

"I don't wanna hear it. You haven't done a single thing I said..."

"Look, proficiency tests start next week."

"....."

"There are more important things than the guitar right now, you know? It's no time for you to be worrying about someone like me, either..."

This was something he had said to her time and time again.

Earnest advice—telling her to focus, through Sports Day, summer break, the school festival, on the classes and tests that inevitably came before and after.

"Are you... planning on skipping practice through the whole exam period, so you can study?"

"Isn't that what students are supposed to do?"

His everlasting, unwavering conviction.

He wasn't wrong. In fact, his assertion was more correct than Kazusa's, to an overwhelming extent.

"Fine."

So, Kazusa understood.

"Oh, great! Then, let's..."

"I'm leaving."

"Eh...?"

She understood that she and this idiot... No, she and this genius would never be able to understand each other.

"Look, I'll accept this. I'll even use it."

"R-Really? I'm glad to..."

"So... quit worrying about me. Don't even think about teaching me how to study again."

"H-Hey, Touma...?"

Kazusa stood up from the bench and walked away, as if to say she had no more business or interest in the matter, and Kitahara watched her leave, dumbfounded.

"Wait, hang on... Where are you going?"

"Oh, yeah. Tell our homeroom teacher..."

The same emotion that Kazusa had just experienced now showed in his face.

"...That I'm taking today off, so that I can study hard for my proficiency tests."

The pain and frustration of wanting to understand the other person, but being unable...

Of course, she didn't go straight home.

It might not be the middle of the night, but Kazusa couldn't put herself in that desolate place right now.

So, on this weekday afternoon, in her school uniform, she wandered aimlessly through the shopping center of Minami-Suetsugu.

Any piece of clothing or accessory that caught her eye, she bought with her credit card, without even looking at the price.

She withdrew a hundred thousand yen in cash, and spent several hours frittering away more than half of it in the arcade.

At first, Kazusa was easily swindled out of a hundred yen in a matter of seconds, being a beginner in shooting and fighting games; but her quick perception allowed her to improve quickly, and her coins stopped going as quickly, so she was forced to move to the crane games, but then she wound up with so many prizes on her hands that she could barely move.

By the time she left the arcade it was already completely dark outside, but she still wasn't really in the mood to go home.

She crammed her stuff into a coin locker and began wandering again.

The streets frequented by students were overflowing with people now that night had fallen, and as a result, the number of men trying to entice Kazusa grew greater and greater.

Two of them in front of the station, two of them in the shopping district arcade, one in an alley...

Three of them she drove away with a kick, one of them she shoved past with a torrent of abuse, and one of them started an argument, only to embarrass himself in the midst of a crowd of onlookers.

Normally, she would be able to ignore this sort of thing completely and avoid trouble, but Kazusa's mood was just a little bit worse than usual today.

In fact, her mood was absolutely terrible...

"Ugh..."

When she finally reached home, it was after ten PM.

She lay down in bed, still in her uniform, and within moments her head was hazy.

Maybe her body had finally caught up with her after not sleeping for two nights in a row or perhaps the five helpings of pudding she had just eaten at Goodies in place of dinner had satisfied her need to keep her stomach full...

I'm sleeping tonight, and that's that.

Through the morning, through tomorrow, however many days.

I don't even care if I sleep all the way through those stupid proficiency tests.

There's nothing bothering me anymore.

There's nothing for me to worry about.

There's no need to concern myself with him anymore...

"Nn..."

Still lying down, still with her eyes and brain half-shut, she reached out to the side of the bed and picked up her school bag, which she had flung down when she came in.

There wasn't a lunch box in there. The stuff she'd bought was in a different bag. And she certainly wasn't about to do any homework.

But, unsure of why she'd done it, Kazusa automatically opened the bag...

"...Uh?"

The contents were no different from usual, but something seemed off about that.

There was almost nothing in there. Handkerchief, wallet, candy. That was all.

None of the writing implements or textbooks that any other student would carry around.

There'd never been anything like that in there, so there shouldn't be a problem...

"...Eh?"

And yet, anxiety boiled up within her. She racked her drowsy brain, trying to come up with the reason. Why had it occurred to her to open it in the first place...?

"...Ah."

After nearly a minute, she finally hit upon the root of her uneasiness. She had put something into this normally empty bag this morning, and it wasn't there.

Chlorophyll Publishing's Sprout Series #16: Foundational English Grammar.

The paper bag from the bookstore...

"...Oh, no big deal after all..."

Having reached her conclusion, Kazusa let out a sigh of simultaneous disappointment and relief.

Because it wasn't the discovery of the century, nor some enormous bitter loss. On the contrary, she had already excluded it from her memory.

"Haha..."

She smiled derisively at herself, yet again, for unconsciously troubling herself over something so stupid.

This pointless resource—she would never use it, but throwing it out with the burnable trash would make her look bad, and no second-hand bookstore would buy it from her. It was nothing but a nuisance.

If she'd dropped it outside, it would be a stroke of good luck in many ways, saving her a whole lot of time. It wasn't like she cared about the environment.

"....."

So, Kazusa felt free to shut her eyes.

With the room lights shining brightly, as always. Praying vaguely that tomorrow would be a better day.

...Even though she wasn't planning on waking up tomorrow.

"Um... We're closed for the night..."

"Shut up. Don't talk to me. I'm busy."

"But..."

Goodies, Minami-Suetsugu branch.

Kazusa had appeared here again, the place she had been in a few hours earlier solely to eat pudding.

But right now, what she was doing wasn't any of the things people normally come to a family restaurant to do—eating, taking a break, killing time...

"If you want me to leave, go and look for it. It's a paper bag, about this big, with the Kitaguniya bookstore logo on it..."

"I've told you, we haven't found anything like that here..."

"Really? Not under the chairs? Not in the kitchen? Did you get down on the floor and crawl on your hands and knees to look for it?"

"That's what you're doing right now..."

"Because you refuse to look seriously, even though you're the employee."

"...Well, excuse me..."

The young part-timer, whose name plate read "Satou," had by this point ceased to use his customer service voice and began dealing with Kazusa in a frank, pitiful way.

As a candidate for manager, he had been forced to deal with this final customer, who absolutely refused to leave, and was chewing over the outrage of it all.

"...Maybe it isn't here..."

"Um, was the item you lost really that important?"

"Of course not. What are you talking about?"

"...I could ask you the same..."

She'd *meant* to shut her eyes.

With no worries, no regrets, almost feeling refreshed, in fact, forgetting all about its existence, all about him...

"I just woke up in a bad mood, that's all."

"I think I'll be able to sleep pretty well tonight, myself..."

So, really, this was just a small impulse on her part.

The bewildered look on his face at that moment...

Her false promise to use the book...

She had just been a little worried that they might bring something bad into her dreams.

Anyway, I've taken care of that obligation.

He should be grateful I looked for it at all.

"No, nothing like that has been handed in."

"...I see."

In a police box in front of Minami-Suetsugu Station, on the way home from the family restaurant, after she'd cut her search short...

It was pure coincidence that it was there.

It's not like it took that much time just to ask.

Making all these little bothersome excuses to herself, Kazusa spoke somewhat nervously to the adult man standing there, in a uniform that seemed to embody the law itself.

...While being reminded of the face of a certain acquaintance of hers, who seemed as though he could very well end up in this occupation in the future.

"If you don't mind writing your address and phone number here, we'll contact you if it's found."

"Ah..."

The police officer dealt with her far more warmly than she had imagined.

He even contacted the other police boxes in the area, checking to see whether it had shown up at any of them.

"But it's the sort of thing they sell in most bookstores, right? And, if it wasn't dropped with anything else, I think the likelihood of anyone bringing in a book by itself is fairly low."

"....."

Though, he didn't forget to give her the cold hard truth.

But it was a completely reasonable opinion. After all, if she were the one to find something like that, she would probably just leave it the second she saw it was a book.

In other words, Kazusa was on a fool's errand...

"And since it's not that expensive, you could just buy a new copy if you're in a hurry..."

"That would defeat the point."

"The point?"

"The point is... it's not important enough to warrant buying a new one."

Whether Kazusa was trying to cut off the police officer's words at that moment, or to cut off her own thoughts...

She didn't know herself, and there was no way anyone else would, either.

"Ah..."

At last, it started falling.

The sky had been on the brink of breaking down ever since she arrived at Minami-Suetsugu two hours earlier, but in a moment's obstinacy, it allowed the cold wind to freeze its tears into ice.

It was getting very late, probably close to midnight.

The last trains were likely about to leave, but Kazusa remained under the eaves of the Minami-Suetsugu shopping arcade, looking up at the rain.

After she left the police box, her feet were supposed to take her back to the station, back home; but just as they had at the school gate this morning, they had begun taking her in the exact opposite direction.

She opened and checked the contents of every coin locker she had used that day, prowled around inside the arcade here and there with her eyes rooted to her feet, and made any number of trips around the area where she had gone shopping.

However, Kazusa may as well have been looking for a single grain of sand in the desert, and reached the present moment with no results whatsoever.

"I should probably just..."

Kazusa's voice as she muttered this was nothing like the griping and sighing she had been doing before.

With every word, tinged with resignation, her tone grew more and more desolate.

Her body was remembering her own face and voice on the day that the world abandoned her.

She had gone so far in her search as to even speak to other people.

She had gone all the way to the police.

All for a single book that she would never use.

For a product she could easily acquire just by walking to Onjuku the next day.

"I should go home..."

She was just about done going along with this uncharacteristically ridiculous whim of hers.

Her body, after doing hours of walking and running around all day, was starting to scream.

Hurting. Heavy. Tired. Hot. Cold.

The streaks of the pouring rain steadily started to increase their pace.

A blessed, merciful rain, cooling her down from the post-summer heat as well as her own feverish body following her search.

But given that she stayed out in it, it became a loathsome rain, stealing away her body heat.

So it was no longer up for debate this time. This time she really would...

I just wasted a huge amount of time.

But that's enough...

I'm going to go home, take a bath, fall asleep, and forget about everything.

Yeah. I can just forget all this.

I made my attempt.

I put all my effort into it.

I've done enough. And...

I've had enough of him.

"...!"

She slipped out of the arcade and ran into the rain.

...Of course, in the opposite direction from the station.

Toward Houjou University... and its affiliated high school.

I'm not gonna go to school tomorrow anyway.

So who cares if I stay up a little longer?

Her excuses to herself were getting harder and harder to buy.

"Why...?"

The time had reached three in the morning.

"Why can't I find it...?"

As a result, Kazusa's outcry of resentment was drowned out by the sound of the rain pelting the pavement, and didn't reach anyone.

She had searched so many places, for so many hours...

From the shopping arcade, to the park where she had parted ways with him.

From the park, to the school gate, just to make doubly sure.

From the school gate, to the station, just to make sure one more time that she hadn't forgotten to check anywhere.

The shops she'd visited. The arcade. The family restaurant.

...She had repeated this cycle over and over and over.

"Stupid idiot..."

The chance of her finding it had been minuscule from the start. She knew that.

But even if she understood, she couldn't get it through her head.

So her anger was directed at herself, half a day earlier.

It was directed at herself, who had usually made a straight round trip between school and home, but just today, today of all days, had to have acted so recklessly.

At herself a few hours before, who had treated her first-ever present from him so shabbily.

At herself, who had no idea how badly a single moment's carelessness would rebound on her later...

She wanted her foolish, lying past self to know how she felt now.

I'm such a goddamn joke.

Why am I running in circles like this?

Why can't I act like usual when he's involved...?

Rain continued to fall.

The spear-like drops splashed loudly against the road to the school, normally shrouded in silence in the middle of the night like this, and pierced Kazusa mercilessly.

Nevertheless, she glared up at the clouds in her usual defiant manner, accepting the heavy, painful deluge head on.

Her opponent did not flinch from her gaze, dashing itself against her head, hair, face, and eyes.

That stinging, that pain... gave Kazusa an excuse for the redness of her eyes.

"...Not yet."

Her feet were too worn out to run any more, but Kazusa dragged them along anyway, retracing the path she had just come down.

She wasn't going to give up.

Because if she gave up, it would break—the bond connecting the two of them together.

Though it was a bond that, half a day earlier, she had decided herself would no longer exist.

A bond that she had continuously denied, without even knowing whether he was conscious of it.

Even so, she had no choice now but to acknowledge that there was some significant attachment left in her heart.

"Haha..."

It was pure coincidence.

The tiny park on the way to school, where she had last parted ways with him.

The five-step staircase at its entrance.

Right beside that, in a thicket...

Underneath the shrubbery, as though it had been taking shelter from the rain, sat the paper bag from Kitaguniya, its printing faintly blurred.

"Ahaha, haha... Oww..."

She had passed by this spot countless times already and overlooked it, but then she slipped and fell on the stairs, which put it right in her line of sight.

This was because, unlike most people, her instinct had been to protect her hands, which led her to a full-body collapse.

She'd banged her knees. Her thighs were scraped. Every part of her body, apart from her back, chest, and palms had been injured.

As she lay there for a while, unable to sit up from the pain, her gaze, which had become parallel with the ground, caught the paper bag.

For the first time in a long while, she thanked heaven that she was a pianist, and that those habits of hers were still etched into her body.

Finally, she managed to sit up, settled herself on the stairs, took the muddied paper bag, and held it tightly to her chest.

It could have been out of some notion of protecting the book from the rain, but given that her whole body was soaking wet, it wasn't likely that her holding it would be very effective.

She was well aware of this, but she couldn't stem the affection her heart had begun to feel for this inanimate object.

Because she had dedicated the whole of herself, tonight, to this very object.

"Last laugh is on you, Kitahara. I found it."

After a short moment, she gingerly opened the paper bag she held to her chest.

Even though the brush had protected it somewhat, the book contained therein was far from undamaged, the cover was dark with moisture, and the entire volume's gone somewhat wavy.

But Kazusa didn't care about that.

Because whether or not the book was in good shape was of absolutely no interest to her.

All that mattered was that it was here...

"...Eh?"

As she turned the pages over to check their condition, her hand suddenly stopped.

It stopped at the scrap of paper that wasn't part of the book, the letters that weren't part of the printed text.

"Ha... haha..."

It was a hidden message, directed at a person who would probably never use a book like this, and therefore with an extremely low probability of ever reaching her eyes.

"Ha, haha... ahahahaha!"

Discreet, but lacking in consideration. As though he'd wanted to put up some sort of front, but his own embarrassment surpassed the feeling and got in the way, preventing anything from being conveyed.

In the face of the same old stupidity from that idiot class rep, all Kazusa could do was laugh weakly.

It welled up spontaneously from her heart, enough to blur out the anger, the frustration, the irritation that she had felt up to this point.

"Idiot... You're such an idiot...!"

Even so, she wanted to keep smiling like this for today.

Because she'd done it. She'd found that single grain of sand in the desert.

It wouldn't be going too far to call that a miracle...

No, Kazusa could readily believe that what had happened was fate.

"Touma..."

"....."

The next day.

The moment Kazusa reached the classroom, she flopped down on her desk and didn't budge.

"Um, listen... Touma, about yesterday..."

"Don't talk to me right now."

"Ugh..."

The class rep, who seemed to have been looking for a chance to talk to her from the instant they met eyes in the classroom, was forced out of the initiative by this lightning-fast maneuver.

He wanted to talk to her about what happened yesterday.

He wanted to know the reason for her anger which he was in the dark about.

He wanted to tell her off with how she shouldn't have skipped class even if he had wronged her, which was supposed to be common sense.

And he wanted to express his timid yet resolute attempt at repairing their relationship somehow.

"Look... all I need is a minute. Will you listen to me?"

There was so much for him to tell her that he couldn't accept her rejection.

So, as always, he continued to press her, knowing full well that it would make her hate him more...

"I'm sleepy. Next week."

"Eh?"

"Let me sleep today. Don't wake me up."

"Touma...?"

"....."

And, surprisingly, she accepted it somewhat easily, albeit with conditions attached.

In a manner that seemed like a sidestep, as though nothing had happened.

To him, with all these extraordinary feelings he bore for her, the excuse to delay was all too welcome.

"All right... Sleep tight, Touma."

"Should you really be saying that?"

But he didn't know the truth.

How significant it was that Kazusa was here right now.

That dawn had broken by the time she returned home last night—or rather, this morning.

That, the instant she stepped out of the shower, she was swamped by relief, exhaustion, and sleep deficit all at once, such that a second's carelessness might have led her to collapse immediately.

That the option to just pass out had flitted through her brain over and over.

That the injuries all over her body ached with every step she took, and it took her half an hour longer than usual to reach the school.

...And that, even after all of it, she just wanted to sleep peacefully next to someone today.

...And, of course, that the "someone" next to her couldn't be just anyone.

So he didn't know. And he probably never would.

About the great adventure undertaken last night by Kazusa, the faithful dog...

One week later, the Houjou University affiliated High School had successfully finished its proficiency tests...

And Touma Kazusa had received the lowest scores in all five subjects.

The closed-off classroom had become more bearable than it had been in the summer, and one needed only to open the window to let in a more pleasant air—the AC wasn't necessary.

With exams over, the clubs regained their former energy, and the school once more echoed with the familiar sounds of shouts and musical instruments.

After looking down at the schoolyard for a while, taking in the breeze, concealed behind a curtain, Kazusa slowly stepped up to the piano, and sat down with the same perfect posture as always.

And, as always, she slowly began to play, waiting for five o'clock.

It was early October, and with it, dusk was gradually becoming an earlier occurrence as the days passed.

It was the first Tuesday since exams had ended and the clubs regained their former energy.

More specifically, it was just about fifteen minutes after five PM.

"He still sucks!"

Even though hardly a second had passed since she heard the first sound, Kazusa was already appraising the performance.

She had been waiting so adamantly that she didn't actually listen to what was being played.

Yes, the guitar part from White Album was flowing in from the room next door.

Kazusa's fingers responded more instantly than usual.

The classical etude that she had just been playing shifted its rhythm, shifted its key, and quickly joined in with that dated pop tune.

And, as if well accustomed by now, her neighbor immediately began to play comfortably, as though entrusting everything to her accompaniment.

Perhaps the fairly standard song selection to begin was meant as a way of dispelling the pent-up frustration of not being able to practice recently, thanks to the exams.

The White Album that came drifting in on the wind, for the first time in ages, made it easy to imagine how much he was enjoying himself—full of energy, lively and bright, mismatched with and estranged from its lyrics that sang of difficult love.

But today, instead of correcting and redirecting, Kazusa abandoned her perfectionism and went along with his pace, strength, and enjoyment.

Just for today, this was fine.

To just have fun, to just be happy.

Just playing together was enough...

"...Hm?"

As Kazusa raised her tempo to match his, he raised it even more.

And when Kazusa ramped it up even higher, he did his utmost to keep up.

It was clearly a debacle of a session, with way too much energy crammed in.

A terrible performance, with none of the quality of the original song left.

And yet...

"You..."

Kazusa's face was shining in a way that it never had before.

This was so different from normal.

Too fast, too strong...

And yet not a single note was out of place.

"And you said studying was a student's first priority!"

After a two-week gap, Guitar-kun—Kitahara Haruki—had plainly improved his ability compared to his performance prior to the exams.

He still hadn't fixed his habits of going too fast or being unable to match her pace, but he was able to pick up the most important thing—the sounds.

This was a skill that could not have been improved without daily practice.

And one that could not have been acquired without practicing it correctly, from the very outset...

You're just as stupid as me, aren't you?

Sounds are way more honest than words.

You were practicing during the exam period, too, weren't you?

Even while you were studying, you thought about the guitar.

You played it secretly. Reading that book, not textbooks...

That park, late at night, in the rain, returned vividly to Kazusa's mind.

That single note, tucked between the pages of the damp reference book.

I bought the guitar practice book you told me about.

It's really easy to understand. I think I should be able to follow along.

Thanks to you, I remembered that the most basic foundations are the most important thing.

That's why I really think this book will be the most useful to you.

I'm the studying expert here, so try to take my word for it.

The school festival and graduation aren't far off.

We've both got work to do, so let's do it.

/Kitahara

"The... Kaiousha Proficiency Series?"

"They're exercise books for complete beginners. Just what you need, Kitahara."

"Did you work your way up with these?"

"No way. It was just my own natural talent."

"Right."

"Just kidding. I wasn't using the guitar one, but they definitely helped."

"You play something other than the guitar?"

"...That's not relevant right now."

"Touma...?"

"Here, just play. I don't have all the time in the world."

She had mentioned the title of this book any number of times that day during summer break, while she taught him about the guitar.

Back when she had started the piano—in other words, as soon as she was old enough to have awareness—Youko had purchased the piano edition of this series, and given it to her.

Her mother had decided to give a book full of kanji to a three-year-old child, but that cheeky daughter of hers, declaring herself a genius, took in all those symbols written there and understood them perfectly.

Her reading comprehension—or sound comprehension, really—was higher than that of anyone else in her age group... a true child prodigy.

Those long-past lessons, etched into her by Touma Youko, now tied themselves to reality...

"You screwed up! Too bad!"

The guitar player had finally made a mistake right at the very end, and Kazusa laughed with delight and scorn.

That night, Kazusa went without sleep for the first time in a week.

However, it wasn't because she was practicing the piano or getting lost in thought, and certainly not because she was studying...

She was undertaking something that could quite fairly be called night work... Sewing, of all things.

The object at hand was the stuffed dog from her drawer.

The birthday present that Youko had sent her two years ago.

This emblem of the rupture between mother and child, torn up and then neglected ever since.

Kazusa worked tirelessly to stitch up the damage that she herself had caused.

At first, she had pricked herself a number of times, unaccustomed to handling a needle. But her piano-trained fingers quickly found the knack, steadily picking up her pace, and her stitches became cleaner.

Even so, Kazusa controlled her pace whenever it started to run too high, warned herself against getting too carried away, and sewed carefully, attentively, trying to keep the stitches as small and hard-to-see as possible.

It wasn't that she had forgiven her mother. Nor that she had accepted the world.

But, this stuffed animal... this dog had done nothing wrong.

And Kazusa herself absolutely had done wrong...

The newly sewn-up stuffed toy was slightly crooked.

But that misshapenness actually resonated with her all the more.

It was like a loyal dog that kept on wagging its tail, even though its feelings never reached its master.

So, after checking how much time there was before school, Kazusa lay with it in her arms for half an hour. It seemed warm, somehow, as she held it.

"Okay, I'm leaving."

And, exactly thirty minutes later... Kazusa tucked her copy of *Chlorophyll Publishing's Sprout Series #16: Foundational English Grammar* next to her faithful dog's chest, addressed the two of them briefly, and left her room.

It was the first greeting she had given aloud in almost two years.

"...Ah..."

The moment she stepped out of the house, she narrowed her eyes in the downpour of sunlight.

The autumnal sky wasn't as painful as the summer had been, but as mild as it was, after staying up almost all night, Kazusa wished it went a little easier on her.

"I don't... want to go to school, really."

Until now, or at least until last year, she would never have shown up at school on a day like this.

But now, her body didn't listen to the grumbling of her mouth, and it took her with a steady gait straight to the station.

And her heart felt something comfortable in her body's self-willed response.

"Seriously, how bothersome..."

Her mouth, having been left behind, continued attempting to return fire with its retorts, but there was no one within her to engage it.

A clear, autumn sky stretched out above Kazusa.

Touma Kazusa had never really hated the sky.

Epilogue

November

—Kitahara Haruki leaves a terrible first impression on everyone he meets.

—That is because people instinctively avoid his repulsive personality.

**Anyone who holds a favorable impression of him from the start either has very strange tastes or is an idiot.*

**Such a person has never shown up and will never show up.*

At least, she never thought such a person would ever appear...

"You're Touma-san, right?"

"Ogiso... Setsuna...?"

But she ended up finding someone like that.

She found another girl who looked at him the same way she did.

The End